

Title: Nothing In Return

Summary: When an imperiused Ron destroys all bonds between the Potters and the Weasleys, Ginny is left with a terrible choice: disown herself and keep loving and supporting Harry from afar, or be forced to hate him against her will.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or anything you might recognize from it. Nor do I own "You Owe Me Nothing In Return" by Alanis Morissette.

A/N: Yes yes, here I am with another HP story. I just can't stay away, I guess. This one is fairly different from anything I've done before, but I'm quite excited by it. I encourage everyone to check out the song, because that was a major source of inspiration for me, and it really sums up Ginny's feeling towards Harry during the story. Rest assured that in the end it will be H/G, but not before some angst happens first! Aside from that, I hope you enjoy!

"You owe me nothing for giving the love that I give
You owe me nothing for caring the way that I have
I give you thanks for receiving it's my privilege
And you owe me nothing in return."

(Alanis Morissette – You Owe Me Nothing in Return)

Ginevra "Ginny" Weasley stared down at her Ancient Runes textbook with glazed eyes, making a half-hearted struggle to focus. At some point in the past fifteen minutes, the runes in the book had all transformed into meaningless squiggles, and Hermione Granger's endlessly lecturing voice had faded into the background. She was supposed to be hard at work studying for her OWLs, which would be happening at the end of the school year, or in less than nine months, but after two solid hours of work, her mind refused to co-operate. After all, nine months seemed like plenty of time to Ginny, but she'd made the mistake of being at work in the library when Hermione walked in. The next thing she knew, it was over two hours later, and Hermione was still going strong.

"Ginny? Ginny! Are you listening to me?"

"No," Ginny said to her textbook, unable to keep the weariness out of her voice. "Hermione, it's only September. Can't I have a little bit of time before you start freaking out over my OWLs?"

Hermione paused and had the grace to look sheepish. "I'm sorry, Ginny. I'm only trying to help."

"I know, and I appreciate it. I guess I'm just really tired today." She finally glanced up and closed her textbook, then slid it into her bookbag just in case Hermione got any more ideas. "One of my roommates kept me up until two in the morning last night because she had a fight with her boyfriend."

"I know how that goes," Hermione muttered.

Frowning slightly, Ginny took the opportunity to really look at her friend, knowing that it wasn't just the dim light of the library that made her look so awful. Hermione's face was pale and there were dark circles under her puffy eyes. She looked completely exhausted, and Ginny had to wonder when Hermione had last eaten or slept. "Are you okay?" she asked gently. "You don't look so good. Maybe you should visit Madame Pomfrey."

"She can't help," said Hermione, smiling wearily. "Not unless she's going to magically find something wrong with that brother of yours this time around."

Knowing that Hermione had a point, Ginny sighed and leaned back in her chair. For the past few months, ever since the Battle at the Department of Mysteries, Ron had been acting strangely, and it wasn't getting any better even though repeated visits to St. Mungos and the Hospital Wing proved that there was nothing wrong with him. But Ron's temper continued to be even worse than normal, causing him to lash out at random times towards innocent people, and he often refused to listen to reason. About a month ago, he'd picked a fight with Harry – one of the few people at Grimmauld Place who had still been willing to speak to him – and he and Harry hadn't been talking, except to fight in increasingly violent ways, since. The situation was placing a terrible strain on Hermione, who didn't know what to do.

"It doesn't make any sense," the redhead said with frustration, propping her chin on her hand. "Ron can be an arse, but he's never acted like this before. I know Harry's tried to make amends and Ron just gets even more angry with him. The Healers have all said that nothing is wrong, but..." She shook her head in despair. "I just don't understand what's wrong with him lately."

"You and me both," Hermione mumbled, tapping her quill against her parchment. Ink dribbled from the end of her quill onto the parchment, but amazingly, Hermione didn't seem to notice or care that her essay was being ruined. "I've even tried running a few tests on him myself, but everything has been coming back negative. I know that something is not right... but how can I prove it?" She exhaled, looking frustrated. "I've already done as much research in the library as I can."

"Maybe you could – " Ginny began. She was cut off when Lavender Brown burst into the library, her hair falling down around her shoulders in wild, windblown ringlets. Her eyes searched the library desperately, completely disregarding Madame Pince's disapproving glare, until she found Hermione and Ginny.

"Hermione, thank Merlin. You have to come quickly. Ron and Harry are fighting down by the Greenhouse and this time it's really bad!" she cried. "Natalie Montgomery has gone for a teacher, but..."

Hermione didn't even wait to hear the last of Lavender's sentence. She jumped up and left the library at a dead run, not even bothering to collect her things. Lavender and Ginny ran after her, chasing her all the way through the castle and out the massive front doors. Even on the steps, it was plain to see what was going on. Just as Lavender had said, Ron and Harry were facing off near the greenhouses. Ron had his wand out and was pointing it in Harry's face. His other hand was wound around Harry's collar in a tight grip so that Harry couldn't escape. Harry's lips were moving urgently, and he had his hands curled around Ron's, trying to make the irate boy let go. The students that were gathered around them watched with varying expressions of horror, surprise, and amusement.

"Ron!" Hermione shouted, sprinting across the grounds. "What are you doing?"

"Stay out of this, Hermione," Ron said, not even sparing a glance towards his girlfriend. "This is between me and the Gryffindor Golden Boy."

"Please, Ron," Harry rasped, his breathing strained. He grimaced as Ron's hold grew tighter, effectively cutting off his breathing, and lowered his head, managing to squeeze out one final protest. "Stop!"

Raw, golden magic flared around Harry's hands, and then a burst of wandless magic hurtled Ron backwards. He landed hard on his back a few feet away and remained still, stunned. Hermione gave a low cry and rushed to his side, while Ginny ran to Harry, who had slumped to his knees. She leaned over him and quickly pulled his robes and shirt away from his throat. Harry flashed her a look of gratitude as he took several deep, slow breaths and coughed.

"Thanks Gin," he whispered.

"Are you okay?" she asked worriedly.

"Get the hell away from my sister, Potter," Ron snarled before Harry could respond. Ginny glanced up to see that Ron was back on his feet and had somehow managed to hold onto his wand. Her eyes widened when she realized that he was pointing his wand at the two of them. "Ginny, get away from him! He's dangerous."

"Have you lost your mind?" Ginny said, astonished. "It's Harry. He would never hurt me."

"You don't understand!" he yelled, blue eyes blazing with rage. "You can't trust a word he says. All he wants is glory. Bloody golden boy, always prancing around the castle, sucking up to the professors. He flaunts his fame and money in our faces, you know. It's always about him and that's exactly the way he likes it!"

"Ron!" Hermione was standing at his side, looking extremely upset. She reached out to touch his arm and kept her voice calm as she spoke. "Please, you know that Harry isn't like that at all. Why don't you give me your wand, and we can sit down and talk about why you feel like this."

For a minute, Ron hesitated, his face softening as he gazed into Hermione's worried face, and Ginny thought that perhaps he would do as Hermione had asked. Then his eyes narrowed, and he shoved Hermione away. She stumbled backwards and slipped on a loose stone, falling heavily into the arms of a rather startled Draco Malfoy (surprisingly enough, he didn't drop her). Ron ignored his girlfriend and kept his wand trained on Harry, who stood up slowly and reached for his own wand.

"Harry," Ginny pleaded.

"I can't let him do whatever he likes, Gin," Harry said. The torment was clear in his vivid green eyes as he faced off against his once best friend. "Ron, I was willing to forgive you up until now, but no one pushes Hermione around like that. I don't know what the hell is wrong with you, but you'd better get over it fast."

"The teachers are coming," one particularly brave student whispered, lifting his head. "Weasley, maybe you'd better – "

"Why, because Perfect Potter said so?" sneered Ron, lifting his wand and completely ignoring the student who had spoken. His blue were dazed, but all of a sudden, he focused and gave a cold smirk. "Don't think the professors are going to save you this time. I don't want you anywhere near my family, and I'm going to make sure you stay away."

Lifting his wand, he began speaking under his breath, too low for Harry or Ginny to make out. Hermione must have heard and understood what it meant, because she gasped and straightened, taking a step forward in an obvious effort to stop Ron. Her ankle gave way under her weight and she ended up right back where she had started, though this time Draco set her down on the ground with an uncustomary gentleness. Harry frowned as a misty golden light began to form around the end of Ron's wand. He didn't recognize the spell and wasn't sure how to counter it. A quick glance in Ginny's direction told him that the girl was just as puzzled as he was.

"I, Ronald Weasley, sixth son of Arthur Weasley and youngest son of the Weasley family, hereby invoke this unbreakable decree," Ron began. His voice sounded different when he spoke, older and more mature, with a heavy dullness. "In accordance with the ancient and honourable rule of familial bonds..." The glowing mist at the end of his wand began to turn into a brilliant shade of blood red. "Any and all bonds, past, present and future, between the Potters and the Weasleys are henceforth broken. De vinculis scilicet olim numquam iterum. Sit Weasley et Potter invicem oderunt reliquis familiarum aeternum!"

With the last word that Ron spoke, the deep red, almost black light exploded with a sound like shattering glass. Ginny felt a horrible wrenching sensation in her chest and fell to her knees, one hand

grasping weakly at her heart. Harry and Ron collapsed at the same time. Hermione moaned low in her throat, a dreadful, keening sound, as Professor McGonagall finally arrived at the scene. She took one look at Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione and sent students to fetch Madame Pomfrey and the Headmaster, then began shoos the other students away from the scene. Once the rest of them had gone, she began attending to Ron and Harry, trying to make sure the two of them were both still breathing.

"Ginny, are you alright?" Hermione called, her face pinched from the pain of her ankle.

Ginny didn't answer. Physically, she wasn't too bad off – already, the pain that had flared was fading – but her chest felt so heavy, like she was trying to breathe while being dragged through heavy mud. Madame Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore arrived at a dead run, and the mediwitch began conjuring stretchers for all four of the students while Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore conferred with Hermione in low whispers. The twinkle slowly disappeared from Dumbledore's eyes as he listened to Hermione.

"Minerva, I'm going to ask you to contact the rest of the Weasley family. Please have them meet me in the Hospital Wing," he said, just loud enough for Ginny to hear. "I recognize that Charlie and Bill are out of the country, but if at all possible, I'd like for them to be present as well. By now, they should be aware that something is not right, and will no doubt be curious. Also contact Kingsley and Amelia Bones. Ask her to bring her best specialist on bonds."

"Yes, Headmaster," McGonagall said, looking deeply shaken. She hastened to the castle ahead of the rest of them.

"I don't need a stretcher," Ginny mumbled to Madame Pomfrey. "I can walk." To prove it, she managed to get her feet underneath her. The world tilted dangerously, but she remained standing.

Madame Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore exchanged long looks. "Very well, Miss Weasley, if you are certain you can make it to the Hospital Wing under your own power, please meet us there," said Pomfrey. With a simple wave of her wand, she levitated the three stretchers holding Ron, Harry and Hermione and began walking towards the castle.

"Headmaster... What happened? What did Ron do?" Ginny asked, looking up at the man. She hadn't been truly concerned until she saw the grave expression on his face, and now she was frightened. "Please, I need to know."

Dumbledore sighed. "Miss Weasley, I would prefer to tell you at the same time as the rest of your family," he said gently. "I believe you should not hear this news alone."

"It's that bad?" she said, wanting to cry but somehow managing to hold it in.

"I'm afraid so."

It took every last bit of strength that she possessed for her to merely nod and start following Madame Pomfrey towards the castle. She sensed that the Headmaster had fallen into step behind her, but she didn't turn around to make sure. If she had, she was certain that she wouldn't have been able to resist the urge to ask him again. Ginny made it all the way to the Hospital Wing without saying a word to anyone, and when Madame Pomfrey directed her to sit down on a bed, she did so without protest. Something really bad had happened... and as soon as the rest of her family had arrived, she was pretty certain that her whole world was going to change forever.

Note: What Ron says, loosely translated, means, "The bonds that once were shall never be again. Let the Weasley and Potter families hate each other for the rest of eternity."

Please review!

A/N: A couple of people expressed doubts about the story, but if you've stuck with me so far, I hope all of your questions will be answered with this chapter. I'm crossing my fingers that this will make sense to everyone. Thank you for all of the reviews! And now, please enjoy.

EDIT: Alright, since some people are unwilling to suspend disbelief until everything gets explained in the story, let me explain a few things. Most of this information would have come out in the story, but I see no harm in posting it ahead of time.

1. So one person can arbitrarily force friends to no longer be friends, and this is not only legal but magic actually makes them follow that? And the fact that said person did not do it of their own will has no bearing on the matter? And there is NOTHING anyone can do about it?

No, that is actually not how it works. You'll find that in the first chapter, I mentioned that Ron has been acting strangely since the Department of Mysteries. What happened to him in there? He was attacked by the brain of someone else. This fact has a HUGE bearing on why exactly one particular student was able to imperio Ron and get him to break the bonds. I assure you that it was not random, it can't be done by just anyone, and this is something that will be covered during the story. Right now, no one is aware of the fact that Ron was under imperius. That will change soon.

2. If it was that easy why didn't Sirius break the ties of the Blacks to rest of the dark families?

What good would that have done? The Blacks are inherently evil, and no amount of breaking bonds is going to change that. All it would have caused is for the other dark families to hate the Blacks and vice versa... and seeing as how Sirius is the only living Black, he already hates those dark families and they hate him.

As an additional note... if you're going to post questions/comments/etc... you want me to respond to, please be signed in when you review. Otherwise I have no way of contacting you.

Amelia Bones, flanked by another witch and wizard, arrived through the fireplace in Madame Pomfrey's office before any of the

Weasleys did. Ginny watched silently from her perch atop a hospital bed as Madame Pomfrey cast one final monitoring spell over Harry and moved to intercept the three of them. The group spoke quietly for a minute, and then the unknown witch and wizard followed Pomfrey towards the back of the Hospital Wing, where Ron had been placed. Amelia Bones gave Ginny a kind smile and left the infirmary, presumably to track down Professor Dumbledore. Moments later, Madame Pomfrey returned and inspected the results from her monitoring charms, her mouth pressed into a thin line.

"Is Harry alright?" Ginny asked nervously before Hermione could.

Pomfrey started and turned to face her quickly. "Oh, Miss Weasley, I'd nearly forgotten that you were here," she said. "Yes, I believe that Mr Potter will be fine. He'll be a bit sore tonight, but nothing that will require an overnight stay. At the moment, he's unconscious from the shock of what happened. Once the headmaster arrives, I'll revive him."

She cancelled all but one of the charms on Harry and walked over to attend to Hermione, who had already been given a pain relief potion. Pomfrey began waving her wand in a complicated motion over Hermione's swollen ankle as the door to the wing opened. Professor Dumbledore, Amelia Bones, Mr and Mrs Weasley, the twins, and Bill all entered the room in a swarm. Her parents gave her a perfunctory greeting; Mrs Weasley immediately hurried to the back of the room to check on her son, while Mr Weasley glanced at Harry and then began speaking to the headmaster in a hushed, worried voice. The twins and Bill came to sit in a cluster around Ginny, and she leaned against Bill's shoulder, grateful for the silent comfort.

Once Mrs Weasley and the witch who had arrived with Amelia Bones had emerged from behind the curtain, Dumbledore cleared his throat to gain the attention of everyone. "Since Percy and Charlie will not be joining us, I believe that we should begin. Poppy, could you please awaken Harry?"

"Rennervate!" Pomfrey murmured with a flick of her wand. Harry opened his eyes and blinked, looking around the room slowly. He seemed quite confused to see everyone standing around and was about to ask a question when Madame Pomfrey handed him a couple of potions and directed him to drink from them.

"Welcome back, Harry," Dumbledore said with a faint smile. "Now, I understand that you have brought some help along to explain things to us, Amelia?"

"If you would?" said Amelia with a glance at the witch.

"My name is Kelley Moore," said the unidentified witch, tilting her head in greeting. "I work for the Department of Magical Heritage at the Ministry of Magic. Madam Bones requested that I come along with her today because she was told that you had a case of familial bonds being destroyed. I consulted the Book of Familial Bonds before we left and discovered that you were indeed correct, Headmaster." She removed a piece of parchment from a pocket of her robe and unrolled it. "I figured that you would want proof and copied the page for you. As you can see, it clearly states that all of the bonds between the Potters and the Weasleys have been destroyed."

Professor Dumbledore looked grim as he took the parchment and examined it. "And there is no way to reinstate them?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Kelley said, shaking her head. "You'll notice that the Book has recorded a permanent seal, meaning that this is completely official and cannot be undone." She turned to face the rest of them with an apologetic smile. "Unfortunately, in a case like this, Mr Ronald Weasley has been documented as an heir to his family. That gives him the right to break any bonds, save for disinheritance, if he so wishes."

"But Ron's only sixteen," said Bill, who seemed to be following the conversation with the most ease. "How can he be considered an heir already? You're not an adult in the wizarding world until you're seventeen."

"True," agreed Kelley, folding her arms. "An excellent point. But unfortunately, I'm afraid that the rules work a little differently when it comes to magical heritage itself. You see, it used to be that most witches and wizards would come into a magical inheritance from their family when they turned sixteen. With the dilution of blood, a full magical inheritance has become less common." She smiled sadly at Bill. "However, those that still receive a magical inheritance of any kind have one additional year of schooling to be trained in the use of those powers. The idea was that a witch or wizard would

become an adult once he or she is fully trained in the use of whatever magical inheritance they might receive.

"Because the status of an heir is considered to be part of a magical inheritance, Mr Weasley was able to hold sway over the familial bonds of the Weasley family as soon as he turned sixteen years old." Kelley sighed and straightened the blue ribbon that held her dark red hair swept back. "In the past, most pureblood families only had one or two children, and generally only one male child, so the magical inheritance wasn't a big deal. It's a rare – and much more complicated – case when a wizarding family has this many male heirs."

"So, wait, what does that mean?" Harry asked, speaking for the first time since he'd awoken. He sat up and looked directly at Kelley. "What exactly did Ron do?"

"In essence, Mr Weasley destroyed any and all bonds that had formed between your family and his, and put a block in place to prevent any more from forming," Kelley said simply. "Simply put, any positive emotions, be it friendship, love, lust or affection, from here on out are going to be null and void. Within the next week or two, the magic involved will forcibly eradicate those feelings, and there's nothing you can do about it." She paused briefly. "From now on, the best you'll be able to hope for, Mr Potter, is a neutral feeling towards all Weasleys. However, I feel I should warn you that in these kinds of situations, it often evolves into dislike or outright hatred. To give you an idea, in 1607, the Book records a Malfoy breaking all ties with the Weasley family."

Harry's green eyes widened slightly in shock and Ginny gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. The depths of hatred between the Weasleys and the Malfoys were well known within the wizarding world, but she hadn't been aware that it resulted from a severance of familial bonds. A stunned silence fell over the room as everyone within contemplated the gravity of what Ron had done. Bill had clenched one fist loosely; the twins looked too shocked to respond. Mr Weasley was shaking his head and Mrs Weasley appeared to be devastated. Her tear-filled eyes were trained on Harry, the boy she had come to think of as a seventh son. Professor Dumbledore looked very old and tired, and Hermione's eyes had filled with tears.

"There's nothing we can do at all?" Mr Weasley said eventually, giving Kelley an imploring look. "I'm the current head of the family. Can't I reinstate the bonds between our families?"

"Unfortunately, no. You may be the head of the Weasley family, but as Ron is considered to be one of your magical heirs, this is not something that you can undo. When he received his magical inheritance and became an heir, the magic recognized him as having your permission to do as he wanted. There's nothing you can do unless you no longer want to be a part of the Weasley family," Kelley replied, looking sympathetic. "I've often considered it to be a problem that schools do not offer classes in magical heritage. Cases like this, while exceedingly rare, do happen. Boys fight, and sometimes the results can catastrophic." She glanced around. "I would like to let you know that we do offer a counselling service of sorts for those who have any questions or difficulty in adjusting to the situation... I realize that it can be a bit of a shock, and – "

"Harry!" Hermione cried suddenly, cutting off whatever else Kelley had been about to say. "Wait. Come back!" She stretched one arm out in vain after her friend as he jumped off of the bed and fled the room. The movement caused her ankle to twitch, and Hermione flinched, giving a low gasp of pain.

"Don't. I'll go, Hermione," Ginny said, wiggling her way out from between her brothers.

"Ginny, you should wait and hear the rest," said Mr Weasley, wrapping an arm around his wife's shoulders. Mrs Weasley sagged against her husband. "This is important."

"What else is there to hear?" asked Ginny bitterly, looking at her father. "Ron's ruined everything and there's no way to fix it. I'm going to grow to hate Harry against my will. If there's anything worse than that, thanks but no thanks. I want to comfort Harry while I still can." She turned and walked quickly out of the infirmary before her parents could stop her.

There was no sign of Harry when she was out in the hallway, and she wasn't quite sure where he might have gone. She knew that he would have wanted to be alone, but in a castle the size of Hogwarts, that wasn't really a hard thing to do. Deciding that she'd head for the Quidditch Patch first, she set off down the hallway, trying not to think

about the implications of everything that Kelley had just told them. In fact, she would have much rather preferred to pretend that the whole day had never happened, but that in itself was impossible. Clearly word had spread that something was wrong and the rest of the Weasley family had been summoned, because nearly every student she passed stopped and stared at her outright. Fortunately, no one was stupid enough to approach and ask questions, because she wasn't entirely sure she could have kept herself from hexing the first moron brave enough to do so.

Within about five minutes, she made it outside onto the pitch and began walking across the grass. The sun was so bright that she had to shield her eyes as she scanned the grounds. Sure enough, there was a lone rider with dark hair shooting around in the air, going so fast and performing such daring manoeuvres that it could only have been Harry. Ginny climbed up onto the Gryffindor bleachers and sat down in the first row to watch. She winced as he performed a particularly dangerous dive that could have easily killed him if he'd waited even a second longer to pull up. Even though she was too far away to make out his face, she could tell that he was definitely upset, and she didn't blame him.

The lone Gryffindor pulled her knees up to her chest and sighed to herself as she watched Harry fly. Why did things always have to happen to him? First he'd lost Sirius in the Department of Mysteries, then Ron had begun acting like an arse, and now this. Worst of all, there was absolutely nothing that she could do to help him this time, because in a week or so they would likely hate each other, and Harry would be even more alone than before. She dug her nails into her legs, biting her lip hard. Normally she loved her brothers, but she could honestly say that at that moment, she hated Ron.

"Why does it have to be this way?" she whispered out loud, feeling the beginnings of tears pricking at her eyes. As the only girl in a houseful of boys, she'd learned at a young age that crying didn't solve problems (though it did help to get her brothers into trouble). For that reason, Ginny rarely cried. But this time, she couldn't help it. A tear slipped down her cheek and landed on her hand. Predictably, Harry chose that minute to catch sight of her and begin flying in her direction. Once he was over the bleachers, he hopped off of his broom and, surprisingly, sat down beside her, breathing hard. Ginny stared out over the pitch, not daring to look at him in case she chased him away with the fact that she was crying. She couldn't

believe that he had actually come to her instead of ignoring her presence entirely.

"Are you okay?" he asked after a few minutes of silence.

"It's just... so unfair," Ginny said, brushing at her eyes. "I'm sorry, Harry. I feel foolish for sitting here and crying when you're the one who should be upset."

Harry sighed and set his Firebolt down on the seat in front of them. "You have every right to be upset too, Gin. This affects you and your family just as much as it does me." He stared out over the pitch, watching as the Slytherin Quidditch Team began preparing for a practice. At last, he said, "I just can't believe Ron would do something like this."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I really don't," he answered quietly, resting his chin on his hand. "I guess I'll have to go back to the Dursleys this summer, but Dumbledore would have probably sent me back there, anyway. Ron was being such an arse that I've already gotten used to that. It'll cause a bit more tension in the dorms, but it shouldn't be too bad. I just... it really bothers me that magic could force me to hate you all. You were the first family..." His voice caught and he broke off, shaking his head. "I can't believe this is happening. There's something not quite right about this whole situation. I... I can't stand it."

Amazed that he'd shared so much, Ginny was silent for a minute. "You're lucky in a way," she said thoughtfully, attempting to lighten the mood a little. "No need to worry about siblings doing the same to you."

"Yeah," he muttered, shooting her a tiny smile. His expression became more serious. "Is that really how it works, Gin? I'm going to hate you?"

"I don't know very much about familial bonds, Harry. It's not really the sort of thing that girls tend to be taught, since we're not considered heirs as long as there is a son," Ginny replied. "But... there's nothing stopping us from doing research in the library, if you want. There have to be books about magical heritage somewhere. I

don't think we should bother Hermione, though," she went on. "She's been really upset about how Ron is acting, and now that he's gone so far, I think she's going to be even more obsessed with finding out what's wrong with him. She won't have any spare time."

"As much as I can't believe I'm volunteering to spend time in the library, I'll do it," said Harry. "I know that witch said nothing could be done, but there must be a way to reverse this." He sounded so desperate that fresh tears rose to Ginny's eyes, and she had to look away.

"Not unless we don't want to be Weasleys anymore," she said softly, more to herself than to Harry. She shivered, suddenly feeling chilled in spite of the warm autumn day.

A shadow fell over the two of them. "Scar-head, Weaselette. I know that it's difficult for you to understand that we're better, but I can't believe that you're lowering yourselves to spying on our team."

"Fuck off, Malfoy," Harry said shortly. "I'm not in the mood."

"In case you hadn't noticed, Potter, you're the one intruding on a private practice," the blond said, looking deeply amused instead of offended. "Unless you're like us to fetch Professor Snape so that more points can be taken..."

With an aggrieved sigh, Harry stood up and slung his leg over his broom. He beckoned to Ginny, who, after a moment's pause, climbed on behind him and steadied herself as the Firebolt rose into the air. Harry glared at Malfoy one last time before the two of them took off, heading back towards the castle. Ginny held on tightly, her eyes pinned onto Harry's back as he concentrated on flying, and wondered what would happen when they had to face the realization that there was nothing they could do about the familial bonds. Would she begin to hate Harry before then? Her hands clenched into fists at the very thought. She would do anything to avoid that future.

NIR

Albus Dumbledore had a headache. No sooner was one thing resolved than his attention was needed elsewhere, and it was beginning to wear on him. The whole situation with the Weasleys and Harry was upsetting enough, but his Defence Against the Dark

Arts professor had unexpectedly resigned not two hours ago. He'd returned to his office and found an owl waiting patiently beside Fawkes with a letter of resignation tied to its leg. Professor Thyme hadn't even given a reason for why he was leaving just a few weeks after school had begun. Was the curse of the position kicking in already this year?

Fawkes chirped comfortingly, and Albus offered his familiar a weary smile. If need be, he was willing to cover the classes for a couple of days, but if a suitable replacement couldn't be found – and soon – then the Ministry would have the chance to put someone of their choosing forward. The thought of another Dolores Umbridge in the school was enough to make him shudder. No, he would have to find someone... but who would be able to take the position on such short notice?

As though in answer to his question, the flames in the fireplace turned bright green, and a low, warning whistle that was audible only to Albus and Fawkes sounded. A young man tumbled out of the fireplace and caught himself on a chair before he could fall. He straightened slowly, revealing warm brown eyes just visible beneath somewhat shaggy dark brown hair, and began dusting off his green robes. Albus sighed and leaned back in his chair, feeling the pressure of his headache increase. Of all the wizards who would choose that moment to visit...

"Hello, Headmaster," the man said brightly.

"Good day, Chance. Please, have a seat. Lemon drop?" Albus inquired, taking one of the candies for himself. They were imbued with a mild calming draught which would hopefully help to soothe the pounding in his temples.

"No thank you. I heard that you're in need of a new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Well, look no further. Here I am, ready to offer my services," said Chance.

"We've gone over this before. It's not safe for you to be here," said Albus, dropping his genial act and frowning deeply. He gave a quick wave of his hand, ensuring that the wards surrounding the office would go up and prevent anyone from hearing a word of what went on. "Even just coming to Hogwarts for a visit is risky, Sirius."

Chance Astrum – also known as the late Sirius Black – scowled and folded his arms. "Albus, I don't care. I know that you feel things are better this way, and you know that I've agreed to this plan of yours as long as it's going to help keep Harry safe. But I can't just lie around on a beach somewhere and hope that you're taking good care of my godson! I've been absent in his life for far too long. I need to be here so that I can be sure he's okay."

"He can't even know that you're you." Albus sensed he was, for once, fighting a losing battle.

"That's fine. As long as I'm here, that's all that matters. Besides, I can be a professor. Merlin knows we used to listen to Remus lecture us all the bloody time. I'm sure I've picked up a thing or two. How hard can it be?"

"Alright, you can have the job just so long as you remember the need for absolute discretion. But, I am curious, how exactly did you know that we were in need of a new professor?" Albus narrowed his eyes suspiciously, realizing that he need not look any further to find the true perpetrator of the so-called "curse".

Smiling nervously, Chance stood up quickly and moved over to the fireplace. Albus kept a container of Floo Powder on the table beside it, and Chance took a small handful and tossed it into the fire as he spoke. "Word travels fast, you know. Well, Albus, I must be going. I'll be here by the weekend. Keep Harry safe until then! The Atrium!" He vanished into the flames.

Smiling in spite of himself, Albus picked up another candy and popped it into his mouth.

For those who may be curious, Chance Astrum loosely translates to "lucky star".

Please review!

A/N: I'm getting a little tired of reviews complaining that the story "makes no sense". If you're willing to stick with me, you'll find out that I have an explanation for everything. If you're not, well, you're not, and I'm sorry for that. Just know that I craft my stories carefully. Having said that, this chapter jumps around a little, but it introduces most of the main storylines except for one, which will happen in likely the next chapter. Enjoy!

Madame Poppy Pomfrey carefully watched the expression on the headmaster's face as he perused the report that she had just handed him. It had gone from a cheerful smile, to apprehensive, to a slight frown, to outright disturbed. He reached the end and looked up, glancing between Poppy and the wizard who had been helping her to look after Ronald Weasley, one Darian Wells, who normally worked at St. Mungo's as a Healer. He was an old friend of hers, a Ravenclaw with a backbone of steel. Darian returned Dumbledore's gaze steadily, seemingly unaffected by the weight of those pale blue eyes, and nodded grimly even before the older man spoke.

"You're certain this is the case?" Dumbledore inquired anyway.

"I've performed the test a dozen times, just to be sure," said Darian, speaking in a hushed voice even though the Hospital Wing was largely empty. "I wouldn't have even thought to test for the unforgivables, but it's routine in a situation like this. After I kept getting the same result, even Poppy gave it a shot. Each test ended up with the exact same outcome. Ronald Weasley was subjected to the Imperious Curse at the time that he broke those bonds."

"But it's impossible," Poppy repeated, straightening her hat. She was tired, having not gotten much sleep the night before. "Albus, there must be some sort of explanation for this. You know as well as I do that it is impossible to use magic to coerce someone into breaking familial bonds. The magic will not respond unless it is done of someone's own free will. If Mr Weasley was being subjected to the Imperious Curse, then the magic should have rebelled and refused to answer his command."

"You are quite correct, but for some reason, it didn't," said Dumbledore. He narrowed his eyes, looking thoughtful. "There is something more going on that we don't understand. Poppy, I do believe that Miss Granger has been most anxious about Mr Weasley during the past few months, citing that his personality has changed. I

know that your tests and scans have not found anything, but I would still like you to run a full barrage of tests on Mr Weasley to see if anything comes up. Use every charm and spell that you are aware of. I'd also like you to speak to his parents in order to obtain a complete medical history. We are missing something, and sometimes magic has a way of hiding the most important clues."

Poppy nodded. "I can do that. I'll begin with the physical tests."

"I'll help you," said Darian. "I have to return to St. Mungos at the end of the day, but if I've got some samples from Mr Weasley, there are more extensive tests that I can perform there."

"Thank you, Darian," Poppy said, deeply relieved. It was distressing to have so much upheaval happening in Hogwarts, and she was grateful to have another experienced Healer to lean on. "We'll start right away, just as soon as I send an owl to Mrs Weasley. Headmaster, if we find out anything, I'll bring it to your attention immediately."

"Thank you, Poppy, Healer Wells." Dumbledore nodded to the both of them as he left the Hospital Wing. He was far more troubled than he had let on to Poppy or Darian. The Weasleys had always been a predominantly light-oriented family, which was one of the reasons that he had been so happy when Harry had become friends with them. Bad enough to think that Harry was now cut off from them completely, but to know that young Ronald might have been messing around with dark magic, to the point where this could have happened? All of the signs pointed to it, and even though he hoped the conclusion was wrong, he suspected it wasn't. It wouldn't be the first time a young wizard had gotten mixed up in something dangerous, and no doubt it wouldn't be the last. Albus closed his eyes and sighed. Where and when had everything gone so wrong?

NIR

Hermione Granger lay awake behind the curtain, her brown eyes staring at the ceiling as she considered the conversation she'd just heard. The sleeping potion that Madame Pomfrey had given to her was still on the nightstand, where it would remain until the Healer returned and scolded Hermione for not taking it already. Her mind was too busy to rest as she processed the ramifications of the fact

that Ron had been under the Imperious Curse when he'd broken the bonds... and that it was supposed to be impossible.

"Funny how magic makes everything possible," she muttered, gingerly changing position and wincing as a jolt of pain shot up her leg. It would have been easy to request a potion from Madame Pomfrey, but she didn't want to. She might have become used to being a witch after years of being at Hogwarts, but there were still some things about it she didn't care for, and that included potions for pain. They had the tendency to make her feel a bit loopy, and that was the last thing that she needed.

What she did need was to go to the library, but Madame Pomfrey wasn't going to be letting her out anytime soon. The last time her ankle had been examined, Madame Pomfrey had left muttering about the possibility of vanishing the bone entirely and re-growing it from scratch. Apparently, she'd twisted wrong when she went down. That would take time, which Hermione didn't feel like she had. Being stuck in bed when her friends needed her help was absolutely maddening. Enough so that she was actually contemplating using a method that she normally would have frowned on.

"Can't believe I'm doing this." Using her pillow, she levered herself up and listened, realizing that the Hospital Wing was probably empty. "Dobby!"

There was a brief pause, and then a pop! as a small creature appeared. Dressed in a pair of pants that were too big, a skirt, two tops, and several of the hats she had knitted the year before, Dobby peered at her with big, round eyes. "What can Dobby be doing for Mr Harry Potter sir's friend?"

"I need you to go to the library for me when you have the time," Hermione said. "Every book that you can find about familial bonds, and the three unforgivable curses. Bring them here. Can you do that for me, please, Dobby? It's dreadfully important. Only, you can't tell anyone, not even Dumbledore."

Dobby squeaked an agreement and vanished without warning. Hermione reclined against the pillow and sighed, staring at the place where he had been and envying his ability to come and go so freely. Those weren't the only books she needed, but she didn't think that Dobby would agree to keep it a secret if a student was researching

Dark Magic. No matter. Whatever the house elf managed to find would be a good start, and hopefully, by the time she got out of the Hospital Wing, she'd be in a far better position to know exactly what else she needed to research. She had a strong suspicion that Dumbledore was right, and that Ron's strange behaviour over the past few months had a lot more to do with the situation than anyone realized. So, in the meantime until Dobby returned, she knew her time could be well spent by creating a timeline that would show how exactly Ron's actions had changed over the months, beginning with the Department of Mysteries. If she could pinpoint what was wrong with him overall, she knew that she would be ahead of the game.

Of course, she realized with a wince, that timeline would have to wait. Madame Pomfrey swept around the side of the curtain with a foreboding expression and gave her a stern look. Hermione smiled sheepishly as the woman pointed to the sleeping potion without saying a word. Knowing that there was no way to get out of it, Hermione took the vial and downed the pale yellow liquid, wrinkling her nose at the pungent smell. Almost immediately, exhaustion swept over her, fogging her mind. She closed her eyes and fell asleep instantly, not even aware of Madame Pomfrey prying the empty vial from her hand.

NIR

Nymphadora Tonks was a woman with a mission, and she didn't just mean her day job as an Auror. As she chewed her way through a massive pile of Mrs Weasley's pancakes, she watched the man across from her with bright eyes that didn't miss a thing. Remus Lupin appeared to be unaware of her close perusal as he flipped through the paper and took a sip from his morning cup of tea. Actually, make that completely unaware of her. Frowning slightly, she decided to force him to pay some attention to her.

"Are you going to contact Harry?" she asked bluntly.

Remus choked on his tea. "What?"

"Because I think it would be good for both of you," she went on, drumming her fingers on the table. "With this whole bond thing, I bet he's having a really hard time. It would make him feel better if he knew that you were still around."

"I'm not around," said Remus wearily, mopping up the spilled tea with his handkerchief. "You know that Dumbledore has me doing a lot of missions for the Order, Tonks, and often I can't speak to anyone while I'm away. It's not fair to Harry to be in contact with him one minute and then disappear the next."

"I can understand that, and I bet the kid would, too," she said quietly. She hadn't been lying when she'd said that it would be good for both of them. Ever since her cousin's death, it was as though the sun had fallen out of Remus Lupin's world. He seemed to have no idea how to cope with the loss of Sirius, and the fact that he was withdrawing from the world deeply concerned her. Where was the quiet but fun Remus, the one that she had fallen in love with? What could she do to convince him that just because Sirius had died, didn't mean that he had to as well?

Before she could say anything else to him, the kitchen door opened and Professor Dumbledore came in with Kingsley on his heels. Tonks stood up, recognizing the serious look on their faces. "What's wrong?"

"You and I have research to do," Kingsley said, glancing at her. "We need to sort through some paperwork at the Underage Magic office."

"What? Why?" Tonks blinked.

"Ronald Weasley was placed under the Imperious Curse," said Dumbledore. Remus gasped. "I need you and Kingsley to find out if the use was recorded with the Ministry. If not, either the student is over the age of seventeen, or is likely a pureblood whose family knows how to remove the magical trace. It is imperative that we find out who is responsible."

"We can do that," she said, nodding and grabbing the last bite of her pancake. She stuffed it into her mouth and chewed quickly, aware of Kingsley's disapproving eye.

"What about me, Albus?" Remus asked.

"I need you to perform a special mission for me, Remus," the man answered. "It may take you some time."

"That's fine," Remus said, shooting Tonks a pointed look. She pretended not to notice. "Anything you need from me, Albus, you know I'll do the best I can."

"How long will you be gone for?" Unable to keep from asking, Tonks paused in the doorway to hear the answer.

"I would think that it would be no longer than a few weeks," Dumbledore said. "The information is all in this package, Remus. Please leave as soon as you can. Good luck." He handed a roll of parchment to Remus and proceeded past him into the kitchen. Tonks lingered, watching as Remus opened the roll and silently perused the parchment. His face remained neutral, preventing her from gleaned any details about the nature of the mission.

"Will you be okay?" she asked.

Remus blinked, startled by the question, and gave her a brisk nod. "I'll be fine. Thanks, Tonks," he said absently, his mind clearly miles away. He brushed past her and headed up the stairs. Tonks watched him go and sighed, ignoring the way that Kingsley impatiently called out her name.

"Good luck, Remus," she said softly.

NIR

"Bloody hell."

It was Friday morning, two days after Ron had ruined everything, and Ginny Weasley was sitting at the Gryffindor table staring morosely into a plate of eggs, bacon, sausage, and toast with strawberry jam. Her stomach was empty, but she had no appetite. She and Harry had been researching hard for the past two days, but most of what they had come up with wasn't inspiring, and Harry seemed to be getting more depressed by the day. He hadn't even come down for breakfast that morning, and according to Neville, he was still holed up in the Dormitory with the curtains sealed tightly round his bed. The morning wasn't off to the best start, but as she glanced up at Seamus Finnegan's loud proclamation, she had the feeling things were about to get worse.

"What's wrong?" Dean Thomas asked around a mouthful of bacon.

"Look at what that Skeeter woman's written. Blimey, she's vicious."

"Ginny," Neville said softly, his face lined with concern. He beckoned her closer, sliding the paper over so that she would be able to see. "You should..."

Heart sinking, Ginny set her fork down and leaned over Neville Longbottom's copy of The Daily Prophet, staring at the damning article written by none other than Rita Skeeter. She hadn't even gotten all the way through the piece before she was trembling with anger. How the hell had Skeeter found out about the bond severance between the Potters and the Weasleys? In a flash, she realized that one of the students that had been in the crowd that day must have contacted the woman, and Rita had taken it from there. Furious, she stood up, not even bothering to read until the end.

"What a stupid, selfish cow!" she swore.

"You mean it's true?" Parvati Patil asked, staring at her in surprise. She had clearly been expecting that Ginny would deny the news. "The bonds really were broken?"

"Yes, but not because Harry's gone dark!" Ginny said hotly, sliding off of the bench. Parvati said something else, but Ginny wasn't around to hear it; she ran towards the doors of the Great Hall, knowing that she needed to get to Harry before someone else mentioned the article to him.

Most of the halls were empty, as the students were at breakfast, so she made good time. Ginny hurried up the steps towards Gryffindor Tower, keeping an eye out for Harry just in case he'd suddenly developed a desire to leave the dorms, and hastily gasped out the password when she got to the portrait. The Fat Lady obligingly swung inward, revealing a handful of students who, for whatever reason, had chosen not to attend breakfast. Ignoring all of them, Ginny strode over to the steps that led up to the boys dormitories and ascended, disregarding the prefect that called out her name.

"Harry? Are you in there?" she called out, knocking sharply on the Sixth Year door. There was no answer. After a couple of minutes, she decided that he'd had his chance and pushed the door open. All of the beds except for one were neatly made with open curtains.

Only the one that was the furthest away had the curtains tightly closed, just as Neville had told her. Ginny frowned anxiously and went over to his bed, putting a hand on the curtain. "Harry, it's me. Please open up. We really need to talk."

"Is anyone else with you?" Harry asked.

"No," she replied.

He opened the curtains a bit and grabbed Ginny by the hand, quickly yanking her into the darkness of the bed. She hit the mattress with a muffled yelp as Harry pulled her legs up and closed the curtains again, muttering a spell to keep them shut. The only source of light was a small, round glass ball that gave off a faint blue light, through which she could just barely make out Harry. His face was pale, with dark circles under his eyes, and he looked tired; obviously he hadn't gotten much sleep the night before, either. Ginny gave him a small smile and felt a pang as he returned it. Harry's smile always used to make her heart flutter, but now she didn't feel anything. It was happening already and she couldn't do anything to stop it.

"What's up?" he said, oblivious to her thoughts.

"Oh, right." Ginny shook her head to clear it and sighed, hating that she had to be the bearer of bad news. "The Daily Prophet arrived at breakfast. Skeeter's heard."

"Fuck," he mumbled, scrubbing his hands through his hair. "Let's hear it, then. What's she said now?"

"That you're evil," she answered flatly, anger bubbling up inside of her at the memory of Rita's cruel words. "She says that you're turning dark and we found out and that's why Ron broke the bonds between our families. One of the students that were watching that day must have contacted the paper. I'm sorry, Harry."

"It's alright. Frankly, I'm surprised it took this long." Harry sighed and rolled his eyes. "Fabulous. Now everyone is going to be staring at me even more than they normally do."

Ginny stared at him and bit her lip, wishing desperately that there was a way to help him. "Can I do anything?"

"Can you turn Skeeter into a worm and step on her?" he asked with a grin. "No, I don't think so. Really, Gin, you just being here is enough. You're the only one who has stood with me through this. I... thank you."

"Harry..." She was glad for the dim light, because her eyes had suddenly filled with tears. Why did this have to be happening? It was so unfair. "I wish that there was a way to fix this."

"So do I," he said with a half-hearted laugh. "But you heard that Dumbledore summoned from the Ministry. The only way is if you're not a Weasley anymore... or if I'm not a Potter. I guess it'd work both ways, right?"

Harry kept talking, but she was no longer listening. A terrible, horrible idea had just occurred to her, and now she couldn't think about anything else. The only way to make it so that she wouldn't slowly grow to hate Harry was if she wasn't a Weasley. The bonds would re-establish themselves if she gave up her name. So maybe... she shouldn't be a Weasley anymore. Ginny shivered at the thought, amazed that she was even having it, and glanced at the boy who was sitting opposite her as he talked about one of the books that they'd been looking through the day before. As much as she loved Harry, not even she would be willing to give up her family, her name, her everything for him... right?

Please review!

A/N: Thank you for all of the wonderful reviews. You don't know how much they help me to write. I've been on a real writing kick this week to ensure that you all get your regularly scheduled chapter next week. I'm going on a trip for five days, and I knew that I wouldn't have time to write four chapters for four different stories, so I had to do double the work this week instead! Fortunately, I'm nearly caught up on everything. Enjoy!

Even though Grimmauld Place looked even older and more frightening at night, Ginny Weasley had no problem easing the covers on her bed back and slowly standing up. After one last check to make sure that Hermione was truly asleep, she gently closed the door behind her and crept soundlessly down the hall, knowing that most - if not all - of her family would be in bed, considering it was almost two in the morning. She was the only one who tended to have difficulty sleeping, which was something that had plagued her since they'd gotten confirmation of Voldemort's return. Her dreams had turned into nightmares, partly about the Chamber and partly about Voldemort coming for her. When you woke up sweating and gasping for breath every time you fell asleep, it wasn't so much fun anymore. Fortunately, she had a partner in that respect.

He was already in the kitchen, pacing restlessly back and forth as he often did during the nights when Remus wasn't around. Sirius turned to look at her when she entered and smiled, his silvery blue eyes flashing in the darkness. She grinned back at him and moved to sit down at the table, where there was already a mug of warm butterbeer waiting for her. Ginny took a sip of the frothy liquid and shivered with pleasure as it warmed her from the inside out, and then looked up at Sirius expectantly. Taking his cue, the man began to speak, picking up where he'd left off the night before. The tales about his youth, about the Marauders, and the days of joy that he missed so much were stories that she adored listening to, and it helped to ground Sirius in reality by chasing away the darkest of the impressions that Azkaban had left on his mind.

"... and then, of course, Lily slapped James across the face and told him he was a great git," Sirius concluded half an hour later, taking a quick swig of Firewhiskey. He placed the bottle back on the table and sat down for the first time as Ginny chuckled to herself, imagining the scene. Sometimes, she could hardly believe that Lily Evans and James Potter had ever ended up married. "Of course, Prongs was so upset that he tried to follow her up into the girl's

dormitory so that he could apologize. He was lucky that the staircase dumped him on his arse, or Lily would have really hexed him, and she wouldn't have taken it off for a week."

"She sounds like a real firecracker," Ginny said, smiling.

"Oh, she was." He stared into the bottle and heaved a sigh. "Ginny, I need to ask you something."

"What is it?" she asked, discomfited by the way that he appeared to be so solemn. "What's wrong?"

"Are you in love with Harry?"

Ginny had just taken another drink of Butterbeer when her mind fully processed his question. She choked, slamming the bottle back down on the table and pounding on her chest to dislodge the liquid. Sirius waited patiently until she had gotten herself back under control and was able to look up at him. His pale blue eyes were intent on her face, looking so earnest that she couldn't even find it in herself to ask if he'd been joking. No, he was perfectly - pardon the pun - serious. Her cheeks turned pink and she ducked her head, playing self-consciously with the mug.

"I... I think I am," she admitted in a near whisper. "Why?"

Sirius reached across the table and clasped her hands in his. "I need you to promise me something, Ginny. Promise me that you will always love him, no matter what. There are so few people that have been around for Harry, and it really worries me that anything could happen. I can accept whatever happens, but I need to know that there will be someone who will stick by him and love him no matter what. Promise me."

"Sirius..." She stared at him, tears in her eyes. "Why... what's going to happen to you?"

"I don't know," he said, which was a lie. She could see it in his face, and the realization hit her hard and heavy. Sirius didn't think that he was going to survive the war. "I know I have no right to ask this of you, but I had to."

She didn't say anything for a long time, just looked down at the table and felt Sirius' gaze on her head. Just when he was about to ask her to forget that he had asked, she glanced up. Their eyes met, and she managed a crooked smile as a single tear slipped down her cheek. "Yes," she said softly. "Yes, Sirius, I promise."

NIR

Ginny Weasley's eyes snapped open and she stared up through the darkness at the canopy over her bed. The memories of her nights spent in the kitchen with Sirius were something she had often looked back on after his death, but she had done her best not to think of that night... the night when Sirius had as much as admitted that he believed that he was going to die. She sat up and opened her curtains, allowing some fresh air into the stuffy bed. Now she couldn't get it out of her head, because her memory of Harry and how upset he had been while they spoke within the safety of his curtains kept haunting her. She had promised Sirius that she would love and stand by Harry forever, but surely not even Sirius would expect her to keep the promise under these circumstances... would he?

Swearing softly, she climbed out of her bed and glanced around, noticing that the curtains were all sealed tightly around the beds of her roommates. She was the only one who was awake that early. Pleased at the prospect of silence, she stripped out of her pyjamas and pulled on a tank top and a jean skirt she'd gotten from Hermione, and then shoved her feet into her shoes. Picking up a small stack of books, she stole out of the room and down the stairs to the Common Room. It was empty, not surprising as it was nearly four in the morning, but she was glad for it. The fires had burned low, but the room was still warm enough to be comfortable, and she settled down in a large, plush chair not too far away from the fireplace. A quick spell with her wand gave her enough light to read it.

She opened the book to where she'd marked, at a chapter about bonds in general. Harry had pretty much given up on researching the bonds after he'd found out about Skeeter's articles; every time he came to the library and so much as reached for a book on how bonds worked, the students watching him would gasp dramatically and dissolve into whispers. It annoyed him to no end and now he spent most of his free time out on the Quidditch Patch, training relentlessly in a way that would have made Oliver Wood weep with

joy. Ginny refused to give up, but even she was starting to get pretty depressed. Every book that she said read the same thing. There was no other solution. The choice had to be made.

Closing her eyes, she bowed her head, allowing her hair to fall over her face as a kind of curtain. The only way for her to not be a Weasley anymore would be to willingly remove herself from the family. Breaking all of the bonds between herself and her family meant that, although they could still be friendly towards her, they wouldn't be able to love her the way that they did now. She would no longer be able to call herself a Weasley, and she would lose all chance of having a magical inheritance. Money would be even more of a concern than it was now. The thought of such a lonely existence terrified her to her very core. At the age of fifteen, she would be completely on her own, with no one but friends. Was that really worth one boy?

"But it's not just a boy. It's Harry," she whispered out loud, her voice sliding into the silence of the dark common room. She brushed at her damp eyes and blinked at the fire. It was the hardest choice she'd ever had to face. The boy she loved, or her family? What meant more to her? Which one could she not bear to live without? Whatever she ultimately chose, the choice couldn't be undone, and she had to decide soon, before it was too late. Either she had to disown herself before the bonds between herself and Harry were gone forever, or learn to let go of him. Pain, so sharp that she gasped out loud, lanced through her at the thought.

Let go of him? Of Harry? Of the baby that had lost his parents and become a legend before he'd known anything? Of the small boy who had entered the Chamber of Secrets to save her, not because he wasn't afraid, or because she was the little sister of his friend, but because he knew that it was right? Of the teenager who had lost his godfather and not known how to deal with the emotions, how to cry afterwards? How could she learn to let go of the one thing that had been constant in her life that had always meant the most?

"God, why does this have to be so hard?" she asked quietly, knowing that no one would – could – answer. It was tempting to seek out Hermione and ask her, because Hermione always had an answer, but Ginny knew that this was a decision that she had to make on her own. Slowly, she flipped through the book until she found that page, the one that had been haunting her, the page that

gave detailed instructions in how to disown yourself from your family. She ran her finger across the directions, realizing with a chill that it was stunningly easy to give up everything.

"Ginny, what are you doing down here at this hour?"

Jumping at the sudden question, she instinctively slammed the book shut and glanced up in alarm, half-fearing that someone had somehow discovered what she was contemplating. She relaxed when she realized who was intruding on her quiet time. Lavender Brown was standing on the stairs, looking rather tired, even though she was neatly attired in her school robes, with her hair and make-up already done. In one of her arms, she clutched a bag that had been jammed full of clothing that Ginny recognized as Hermione's.

"I was just... thinking," replied Ginny, tucking the book underneath her arm so that Lavender couldn't see the title. "Were you headed to the Hospital Wing?"

"Yeah. Professor McGonagall caught me last night and asked me to fetch Hermione some clothing. Apparently she's in for rather a long stay," Lavender said, muffling her yawn with her hand. "Frankly, I'd be glad of it, but I know Hermione's going to be a right pill. Nothing bothers her more than missing school."

"I'll take them to her," Ginny volunteered, standing up. "I can't sleep, and there's no need for both of us to be up and about at this hour. You can go back to bed."

"Really?" Lavender's eyes lit up at the prospect of another few hours of sleep, and she gratefully handed Hermione's bag over to the redhead. As Ginny leaned forward to take the bag, Lavender frowned, realizing that the light of the fire had reflected off of the tear trails on Ginny's cheeks. Curiosity overwhelmed her, but she had the sensibility to say nothing about it. "Thanks a million, Ginny. It was so hard drag myself out of bed this morning. I was having the nicest dream about Seamus – "

"Stop," Ginny interrupted, holding her hand up. "I don't need to know any more than that. I can guess all of the details of your 'nice dream'. I hope you have luck getting back to it."

Lavender grinned and turned, disappearing back up into the dorms as Ginny hooked Hermione's bag over her shoulder. She crossed the room and went out the portrait, ignoring the Fat Lady's sleepy protests about students being out of bed so early, heading in the direction of the Hospital Wing. If she knew Hermione as well as she thought she did, she didn't have to worry about waking the other girl up. Even though it was just after five in the morning, Hermione would no doubt be hard at work.

As she encountered no one, the trip to the Hospital Wing didn't take very long, and within a few minutes, Ginny was pushing the door open quietly and stepping inside. The wing was silent, since most of the beds were unoccupied. She closed the door and glanced at the back of the room, where Ron's bed had been moved. His curtains were parted slightly, and she could just make out the movement of his body on the bed as he rolled over. Apparently, he'd woken up the day before and thrown something of a fit when he discovered that he wasn't allowed to leave, insisting that there 'was nothing wrong with him'. Professor McGonagall had told Ginny that she could visit if she wanted to, and that Ron had asked for her, but honestly, Ginny had no desire to.

Why should she take the time to visit someone who was not really her brother? Over the past few months, Ron had become a virtual stranger to her. She'd been on the receiving end of his temper one too many times to want to visit him; it would only cause another fight when Ron found out that she was still hanging around Harry, and she didn't think she had the patience to deal with it without snapping. Ginny glanced away from his bed and walked towards Hermione's bed, thinking that at least if she broke the ties to her family, she would no longer be Ron's sister. That, at least, would be some small consolation.

"Hermione?" She spoke in a whisper as she eased the curtains apart to reveal the older girl sitting up in bed, pouring over a book while scribbling madly on a piece of parchment. Realizing that Hermione must have charmed the curtains to not show any light, she quickly closed them behind her to avoid alerting Madame Pomfrey.

"Ginny? What are you doing here so early?" Hermione asked, looking surprised. Her gaze landed on the bag Ginny was carrying, and she let out a breath of relief. "You've brought me clothes. Thank

goodness. I'm so tired of wearing these dreadful gowns. I'm not really one for fashion, but I hate these things."

"Lavender was on the way here, but I said I'd bring them instead. I didn't know if you'd want to see her. What are you doing?" Ginny set the bag down on the bed and sat down in the chair that had been pulled up next to Hermione's bed. Hermione was sitting with her wounded leg stretched out in front of her, propped up on several pillows. "How is your leg feeling?"

"It still aches an awful lot. Madame Pomfrey says it was a bad break," replied Hermione, setting her quill down and grabbing her bag. She began to rummage through it as she continued, "She could mend it, but she told me she's worried that repairing it could mean that I'll still suffer pain from time to time. I think I'm going to ask her to vanish the bone and start over with Skele-Grow, but that means another couple of days here."

Ginny had to smile at how exasperated her friend sounded. "I know it's hard to stay here. I remember how frustrated I was when I broke my ankle. But maybe it's for the best. You don't want to hurt yourself by moving around too soon."

"But I have so much research to do." Hermione leaned forward, beckoning Ginny closer, and whispered, "I overheard Madame Pomfrey and that Healer from St. Mungo's speaking to Professor Dumbledore. They say that the Healer ran some tests and found out that when Ron broke the bonds, he was under the Imperious Curse."

"He was?" Ginny's eyes widened with shock, and she suddenly felt a little guilty for her mean thoughts about her brother. Ron had been acting like a jackass, but perhaps it wasn't entirely his fault after all. "So... he didn't want to do it? Someone made him?"

Hermione sighed and folded one of her sweaters. "No. That's what I thought at first, too. But Madame Pomfrey said that it's impossible to use magic to coerce someone into breaking bonds. It has to be done of their own free will, or the magic will rebel. I know there's something deeper going on that we don't know about yet, but I think the only explanation that would make sense is that some part of Ron actually wanted the bonds to be broken. That's why it worked. The Imperious Curse just gave him some encouragement."

"Oh." Her excitement deflated, Ginny hunched her shoulders and frowned. "But you don't know why Ron has been acting so weird? Why he would even want to break the bonds? He and Harry are... were best friends."

"That's what I'm trying to find out. Look, I made a timeline of everything I can remember about how strangely Ron has been acting, and it all begins after the Department of Mysteries," Hermione said, displaying the piece of parchment that she had been writing on. A long line had been drawn across the page, and Hermione had added dates and bits of information to it. "Something happened there. Either Ron was cursed, or...well, I think we need to get a pensieve from somewhere just to be sure."

"A pensieve? What for?"

"I can't remember everything that happened in detail. My memories of that day are kind of muddled," answered Hermione. "We all received basic treatment afterwards and Ron appeared to be perfectly fine according to all of the tests, but we know that's when his behaviour began getting weird." She hesitated, and Ginny knew by the look on her face that Hermione had come up with a theory that she was uncertain about.

"What is it?" she asked. "Hermione, what's wrong?"

"I think it might have something to do with that brain that attacked Ron," Hermione said in a rush, looking concerned. "I've been researching, but none of the spells for behaviour modification or control sound anything similar to what Ron's been going through. It's like he's become a completely different person, and that worries me. But I can't be certain until we've got a pensieve. If we could examine the memories, maybe I could find out whom that brain belonged to. That might give us a point to start on."

"You're suggesting that the brain did longer lasting damage than we realized? That maybe whoever is belonged to is, what? Changing my brother?" Ginny said, horrified by the implications. That brain could have struck any one of them. She shivered, realizing that if Hermione was right, Ron might not be able to be cured after all. Perhaps he would be stuck that way forever. "Hermione, where are we going to get a pensieve from?"

"I don't know. They're rather expensive," she said. "I had thought to ask... Harry got documentation from the Ministry this year about the Black vault. Sirius left pretty much everything to him. Maybe there's a pensieve we could use. I'll talk to him about it when he visits me again, and maybe he can ask Professor Dumbledore to arrange a trip to Gringotts to examine the vault."

"When I get back to the Tower, I'll ask him to drop by." Even though she had planned to visit with Hermione a while longer, Ginny stood up. She needed to be by herself for a while to think about what Hermione had just told her. "Where did you get all of those books from, anyway?"

"The library. Dobby brought them to me. I wanted more books on familial bonds, but he said that most of them had been checked out."

"Harry and I borrowed them," said Ginny, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She picked up the book that she'd taken with her from the tower and placed it in Hermione's lap. "We were just researching to see if there was a way to repair the bonds between our families. Here, you can have this one now, and I'll send the rest along with Harry."

"You couldn't find an answer?" Hermione asked sympathetically.

"Not unless Harry no longer wants to be a Potter, which I really doubt, seeing as how he's the only one left. Or unless I choose to disown myself so that I'm not a Weasley anymore."

She had meant for it to be a flippant comment, but Hermione sat up straight and looked at her closely, studying her in spite of the dim light. Ginny was uncomfortable by the level of scrutiny in those brown eyes and turned away, pretending that she needed to straighten her shirt as she wondered what to say. Hermione's level of intelligence was almost annoying sometimes; she could catch the slightest little thing and know that it meant something important.

"Ginny..." Hermione said slowly. "Are you...?"

"I don't want to talk about it. Please," Ginny said quietly.

Hermione studied her a moment longer before reluctantly nodding in agreement. "Alright, if you're sure. Just... think about it carefully. That's a dangerous topic to be getting into, and it can't be reversed."

"Tell me something I don't know," she said, forcing a smile. "Bye, Hermione. I hope that your ankle feels better."

"Thanks. Good luck."

Ginny pushed the curtain open and slipped through before Hermione could say anything else. She was upset with herself for letting Hermione have even the slightest inkling of what she'd been thinking about, but at least she knew that she could depend on Hermione not to say anything to anyone. Hermione had the tendency to be a stickler for the rules and a bit of a 'goody two shoes' at times, but she'd seen the unspoken consent in Hermione's eyes. Until Ginny had decided what she was going to do, Hermione would remain silent on the subject and allow her to make her own choice... whatever that might be.

Please review!

A/N: Thank you so much for all of the reviews; I loved them! Just to let you know, I introduce Ginny's best friend in this chapter. I realize that according to the movie (possibly the books as well, I only read 6 and 7 once and like to pretend that they don't exist), Astoria Greengrass had white-blond hair, like Draco. Personally, I've always imagined her with medium-brown hair, and so in this story, that's the color she has. Furthermore, I took liberties with Ginny's wand, since it seemed like no website could conclusively give me details on what the make was. I looked up wand woods/cores on the Harry Potter wiki and picked what seemed to fit Ginny, so many thanks to them as well. Enjoy!

Due to an unexpectedly long Quidditch practice (Katie Bell had apparently begun channelling Oliver Wood in her sleep) that ended only when Professor McGonagall threatened them with detention for missing curfew, Harry wasn't able to go and visit Hermione until the next day, after classes were finished. Ginny accompanied him down to the Hospital Wing, though she didn't plan on staying. She would have liked to have participated in the conversation between Harry and Hermione, but it was getting a lot harder to be around Harry. The magic was clearly hard at work, because every time she saw Harry, she felt... less for him. At that moment, she could look at him the way she would have looked at a complete stranger, and that was killing her inside. Time was running out... when the bonds were completely severed, she wouldn't be able to reinstate them even if she did disown herself. If she didn't do it soon, she wouldn't be able to do it at all, and that was all she could think about every time she met his eyes.

"Thanks for walking me down, Ginny," Harry said as they approached the Hospital Wing door. He shifted, balancing the books on familial bonding that Hermione had wanted on his hip, and held out his now free hand. "I can take those ones from here."

"Okay." She handed over the books that she had been carrying and wanted to cry when their eyes met and she saw the blank look in his eyes. It made her angry to think that after all of the time and effort that it had taken for Harry to see her as one of his friends instead of as "Ron's little sister", things were even worse than before. "Harry, have you considered..."

"Considered what?" he prompted when she trailed off.

"Well, the only way to get around this is if... well, if one of us is no longer a Potter or a Weasley," she said quietly, glancing around to make sure that no one was close enough to listen in on their conversation. Discussions about such serious magic probably would have warranted them a trip to the Headmaster's office if they were caught. "Have you thought about it?"

Harry sighed and leaned against the wall. "I'd be lying if I said I hadn't, and the idea is tempting, but I just don't think I can do it, Ginny. I'm the only Potter left, and if I disowned myself, that means the line would die. I couldn't do that. It's one of the only things I have left from my parents." His face twisted, and he turned his head away from her. "Besides, I don't know what that would do to the protection my mother gave me when she died. It might... might mess around with it, and I need that if I'm going to fight Voldemort again." His voice had gotten very quiet by the end of his sentence, so that she had to lean in closer to hear.

"Oh, Harry," Ginny said softly, unsure of what to say; she'd never stopped to consider that if Harry disowned himself, he might also be severing Lily's last gift to him. She regarded him sympathetically, realizing that it really was up to her to solve this mess. There was no way Harry was going to be able to stop being a Potter, so it was on her shoulders. If anyone was going to disown themselves... well, she had a lot less to lose than Harry did, didn't she? That protection could be the one thing that might save his life some day.

"But I don't want you to do it, either," he added, straightening up to look at her. He offered her a tired smile. "It's not worth it, Ginny. We'll be okay. I'll still have Hermione, and you'll still have your family."

Ginny just nodded, and Harry clearly took this as an agreement because he turned and went into the Hospital Wing. She leaned against the door and felt her eyes fill with tears when she heard how warmly Harry and Hermione greeted each other before the sound was cut off by a silencing charm. Harry didn't think that it was worth it - that he was worth it - but she disagreed. Harry was a good man, for all of his faults, and she had been in love with him for as long as she could remember. The thought that any magic or anyone could take that away from either of them wasn't right.

She knew that the two of them would probably want a level of privacy that not even a silencing charm could grant, so she pushed off of the door and headed back down the hall, her mind spinning. For all intents and purposes, it sounded as though she had made up her mind, and that terrified her to no end. Was she really ready to do something so permanent? What about her parents? Her brothers? As much as she loved Harry, she loved them, too, and she couldn't really imagine a life where she wasn't related to them anymore.

"I just can't keep thinking about this over and over," she whispered out loud, running her hands through her hair. Deciding that she needed some fresh air that didn't involve staying on a broom until her thighs were chafed, she headed towards the front doors. The sun was shining and a cool breeze was blowing, making it the perfect autumn day, but she didn't pay much attention as she stepped off of the stairs and wandered towards the lake. Her hand unconsciously gripped the edge of her wand, which had been shoved into her pocket after Transfigurations was over. She circled her fingers around the tip, feeling the worn, smooth wood that pulsed beneath her touch.

Should she just do it and get it over with? What would it be like to be alone in the world, knowing that her family still had each other? Would her parents be angry with her, or would they understand? Ginny sighed and sat down with her back braced against the trunk of an old tree, looking out over the lake. This had always been one of her favourite spots on the Hogwarts grounds because of the beautiful sight no matter what season it was, but the view no longer comforted her the way it once had. She dropped her head, looking at her knees, and clenched her hands into loose fists. No, she didn't want to do this, but would she do it? Was she willing to give everything up for Harry? To keep her promise to Sirius that she would care and stand by his godson forever?

"You look like you're having fun," said a voice right behind her.

"Would you stop trying to sneak up on me?" said Ginny, too depressed to even pretend that she'd been frightened. "It never works, Tori."

"As soon as you stop calling me 'Tori', I'll think about it," said Astoria Greengrass. She was seated on the other side of the trunk, where the tree's branches dipped towards the ground and hid her from any

students that might be walking by. From where both of them were sitting, they could each see the lake or the castle. "What's up? The rumour mill is going crazy."

"You read the paper, didn't you?" she muttered. "It's mostly true. Ron broke the bonds between the Weasleys and the Potters, though it wasn't because we think Harry's gone dark. If I don't stop being a Weasley, then I can't be friends with Harry anymore." She swallowed hard to hold back the tears.

Astoria was quiet for a moment as she absorbed this. "I'm sorry, Ginevra."

That did it. First one tear slipped down her cheek, and then another. She sniffed and crawled around to the other side of the tree, so that she could be closer to her friend. Astoria's long, curly brown hair helped her to blend into the shadows, but her violet eyes were bright with concern. Ginny shifted closer to her and lay down, placing her head in Astoria's lap. Soon, she felt familiar hands fiddling with the clasp of her ponytail, and then fingers running soothingly through her hair. It was a comforting feeling, and she closed her eyes, at peace for the first time in nearly a week.

Most people in the castle would have been shocked to see a Gryffindor and a Slytherin looking so cozy, but Ginny had been friends with Astoria ever since her second year at the school, when a lot of the other students had been nothing short of terrified of her. Professor Dumbledore had managed to keep the real story about the Chamber of Secrets under wraps, but sometimes the rumours were worse than the truth. Even the first years had been cautious and frightened when she passed by. She'd struggled a lot with making friends of her own, and had been crying out by the lake one morning when Astoria had discovered her and made fun of her for crying. Somehow, the two of them had gotten around to talking, and it hadn't taken twelve-year-old Ginny long to realize that she had found a similarly lonely soul in Astoria, who was often overlooked for her prettier, richer, and more sophisticated older sister.

It had taken some time for the two of them to become close and grow to trust each other. Neither one felt comfortable letting anyone else become aware of their friendship, which made it hard to slip away and meet. But being friends with Astoria had proved to be worth it: Ginny admired the way that Astoria was able to get what

she wanted and needed without stepping on toes, and Astoria, although she would never admit it, liked how Ginny was more open and honest. For Ginny it was the first time that she'd had a female friend outside of Hermione... and she realized that she liked it. Her friendship with Astoria had eventually enabled her to make other friends, like Colin Creevey, Luna Lovegood, Neville Longbottom, and Hannah Abbott, but she and Astoria had always remained closest.

The cessation of the stroking drew her back to reality. Ginny smiled a little and curled closer, brushing at the tears on her cheeks. "I didn't know what to do, to be honest," she said softly. "If I disown myself, then I won't have anything. My parents, my brothers, my inheritance, my money, even my name... But if I don't, then..." Ginny sighed deeply. "It's such a big mess. Hermione told me that the Healer from St. Mungo's thinks that Ron was under the Imperious Curse when he broke the bonds. She says that she thinks that what happened at the Department of Mysteries has something to do with it. Maybe she's right, but regardless, that doesn't change the fact that it's been almost a week and I can feel the magic changing the way I feel about Harry. It's getting a lot worse."

"I guess the time has come for you to choose," Astoria remarked, pushing a few strands of hair behind her ear. "How will you make up your mind?"

"Actually, I think I'm going to disown myself," Ginny replied, pushing herself into a sitting position. She glanced at Astoria and offered a weak smile. Saying it out loud was upsetting, but she didn't feel the amount of dread that she had expected. "At least this way, I won't hate anyone. I'll just feel neutral towards my family. My parents will probably be angry, but I'll just have to accept that. Maybe I could even be friends with the twins or Bill and Charlie. I... I believe this is best."

"Just don't do it for anyone but you," cautioned Astoria, dropping the hair tie into Ginny's hands. Her face was unusually serious. "If you do this just for Harry's sake, sooner or later you might come to hate him."

Ginny was visibly shocked by the comment. "I guess I hadn't thought about it like that," she admitted, glancing back out over the lake to avoid Astoria's keen violet eyes. She fell silent, thinking hard. Was

she contemplating this just for the sake of Harry and the promise she had made to Sirius? Or was there another reason?

For most of her life, Ginny had only been known for two things: being the youngest of the Weasley family, and the younger sister of her older brothers. The only times she had ever stood out was after the Chamber, when people had been frightened of her, or when students wanted the "inside story" on Harry Potter and thought she would be willing to share private details. Ron had always thought that he had it difficult living in Harry's shadow, but he'd never even had a taste of what it was like being the baby girl with six protective older brothers, particularly in the wizarding world, which still had the tendency to be fairly sexist. As much as she loved and adored her family, she'd resigned herself to the fact that she would probably never stand out in a good way a long time ago.

Was it worth losing practically everyone else that she cared about for Harry? For a chance to stand up on her own two feet and forge her own way in the world on her own terms? To not be a brother to Ron, who was rapidly becoming someone that she was ashamed to admit that she was related to, regardless of the Imperious Curse? Ginny wiped the fresh tears off of her cheeks and took a deep breath as she realized something very important for the first time. If she chose not to do this, if she stayed a Weasley, she had a good idea of how her life would turn out, and that wasn't the life that she wanted. Furthermore, she knew that she would always wonder what might have happened if she had chosen to disown herself. She didn't want to spend the next two hundred years wishing that she had done things differently. Remus had once told her that regret was the most useless emotion, and she believed him.

"I've made up my mind," she announced, and was startled by how calm her voice was. She twisted, looking back at Astoria, searching for any sign that her friend felt that she was doing the wrong thing. "I'm going to do it. Not just for Harry, but for me too. I... What you said made me think. It occurred to me that I have to think about what's best for me, and part of that means that I need to be there for Harry, no matter what it costs."

"Now you're thinking like a Slytherin," Astoria said with a smile, her violet eyes twinkling. "Even if your actions are completely Gryffindor in terms of bravery and foolishness."

She laughed and was surprised by how good that it felt when Astoria joined in. They giggled together until, just outside the shield of branches, a group of chattering students passed by, speaking in loud voices about what they thought was going to be served for dessert that night. Ginny cut herself off immediately and ducked low to the ground, instinctively covering her bright, orangey-red hair just in case someone caught a glimpse of them through the branches. Astoria went very still and didn't move an inch until the voices had drifted away. Only once they were totally sure that the students were long gone did they relax.

"I guess it's time for dinner," observed Astoria, casting a spell with her wand. She peered at the already fading numbers and nodded. "It's just after six. Are you hungry? Do you want to think some more? Or maybe you'd prefer if we had a training session to help take your mind off of it for a little while?"

"No, I should do it now, before I lose my nerve," Ginny said, pulling her wand from her pocket. Looking thoughtful, she glanced at Astoria. "Tori... what would you do?"

Astoria considered the question and answered honestly. "Well, I don't love Draco the way you're in love with Harry... but we both want the same things in life, so I wouldn't mind standing by his side. Besides, I'm probably going to be disowned someday, anyway. I guess I would probably go ahead and do it myself. Better for it to be on your terms than for it to be done by your family." An apologetic smile graced her lips and she shrugged sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Ginevra, it's a hard question to answer. I don't know what it's like to be in love with someone like that."

"No, you helped," said Ginny, glancing down at her wand. The dark wood shone in the fading light, and she smiled sadly, running the tip of her finger down sleek handle of the wand. On the day that her family had purchased her wand from Ollivanders, after none of the older, family wands had worked for her, she had been so proud. 10 inches exactly, willow, with a phoenix feather for a core. Never in her wildest dreams would she have imagined that four years later, she would be disowning herself with the help of this wand. "Will you stay here with me, Tori? I don't want to be alone."

"I won't leave, I promise."

Ginny shot her a grateful look as she stood up and dusted the leaves off of her pants and shirt. Fighting back a shiver, she took a couple of steps out from under the safety of the tree, holding her wand up in front of her while she pondered over what she was going to say. Although there had been details about the ritual in the books that she had read, none of them had given exact instructions for the words that she had to speak, mostly because there was no specific spell or charm for disowning oneself. Every single book had stated the same thing: her words had to come from her heart, and only if she was truly serious would the magic accept it. She swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and spoke.

"I, Ginny Weasley, seventh child of Arthur and Molly Weasley and only daughter of the Weasley family, do henceforth renounce my name and all ties to the Weasley family," she said shakily. From the tip of her wand came a beautiful golden mist that surrounded her and turned white at the edges. She closed her eyes and felt her magic churning as it responded to the presence of the mist. "Let it be known that I do so willingly, of my own desire, and with full knowledge of all consequences. I am Ginevra, only." As a last step, as the books had instructed, she lifted her opposite hand and whispered a spell before slashing her wand across the soft skin of her palm. Blood welled up and began dribbling between her fingers, disappearing into the mist before it struck the ground. The mist turned an ugly, reddish black color as she spoke the final words. "Vinculum ut quondam erant vadium nunquam exsisto iterum. Ego Ginevra sum volutarie infirmatio ut agnosco ego ut a secui of Weasley prosapia cetera of infinitio!"

Pain, starting in the palm of her hand and searing its way across her arm, exploded throughout her body. She was vaguely aware of Astoria screaming her name behind her as the mist turned a bright shade of red, the color of fresh blood, and exploded around her in a burst of black light. Ginny collapsed, hitting the ground with the kind of force that made her whole body ache, and closed her eyes. Exhaustion, heavy and thick, ran over her. As she gave in to it, she had just enough time to think that there was a part of her that felt a whole lot lighter... and a whole lot more empty.

A very loose translation of what Ginny said in Latin is, "The bonds that once were shall never be again. I, Ginevra, am willingly refusing to recognize myself as a part of the Weasley family for the rest of eternity."

Please review!

A/N: I feel like there might be a bit of confusion as to what Ginny is experiencing now that the bonds are broken, so I'm going to try to clarify now. I took my inspiration from something called Capgras Syndrome – feel free to look it up if you're curious. Essentially, in Ginny's case, it would be like looking at your mother or father (or someone else you loved dearly) and feeling the way you would if you looked at a complete stranger. Ginny feels nothing positive for her family. She can't love them or feel affection of any kind towards them. She can remember what it was like to love them in some cases, but the emotion itself is completely gone. Her brain has literally been changed by magic to forever regard the Weasley family as strangers. The best she can do is feel neutral towards them, but that neutrality can easily become hatred.

By the way, disowning is different in that it happens immediately, whereas breaking familial bonds occurs more gradually. It's the difference between cutting a rope with scissors or allowing it to fray slowly. And before anyone says "that sounds way too out there", please look up Capgras Syndrome and other affiliations. Our brains can do some seriously weird shit to us without magic, so I don't think it's too out there to think that this could happen with magic.

Hermione was awake when Professor Snape swept into the Hospital Wing, levitating Ginny's body behind him. Draco Malfoy was on his heels. Madame Pomfrey had just been getting ready to vanish the bone in Hermione's ankle, and she turned, irritated at having her concentration interrupted. When she saw Ginny, her face went pale and she hurried over to Professor Snape's side. The two of them held a quiet conversation that Hermione couldn't hear, and then Pomfrey directed Snape to place Ginny on one of the free beds near the back, on the opposite side of the room from Ron. She and Snape disappeared behind the curtains, leaving Draco and Hermione alone in the main part of the room. The two of them looked at each other for a moment, then simultaneously glanced away, but not before Hermione noticed that Draco was clutching at his left arm in a strange way.

An awkward silence fell over the wing. After a minute, Draco sat down on one of the empty beds and gingerly eased himself back onto the pristine white covers. He grimaced when the movement jarred his arm and sat very still until the pain had passed. Hermione pretended that she hadn't been watching him and instead pulled one of the books that Harry had brought to her into her lap. She opened

it to her bookmarker and stared down at the page without really processing what she was seeing. After her talk with Harry, she had hoped to speak to Ginny once more before the redhead did anything, but it appeared that she was too late. A depressed sigh escaped her.

"Are you okay?" Draco asked suddenly.

"What?" Hermione turned her head and stared at him, hardly able to believe that Draco Malfoy, of all people, had just asked that question.

"You were sighing. I thought maybe your leg hurt. I'm going to get a pain potion for myself, so I could get you one as well." Draco looked uncomfortable as he spoke, though whether that was because of his arm or his offer, she wasn't sure.

"No, I'm fine," she said slowly, trying to wrap her mind around the development of Draco being nice. "My leg does hurt, but I don't like taking pain potions. They make me feel strange." Almost as soon as she'd spoken the words, she recoiled, amazed. What was wrong with her, sharing that kind of information with a Slytherin? Had she lost her mind?

"That's common. There are potions that don't do that." Carefully, he slid off of the bed and walked over to the cupboards where Pomfrey kept most of her potions. Hermione watched with interest as he opened the doors and scanned the rows of potions. Draco seemed to know exactly what he was looking for, even though most of the potions were labelled by their Latin names. He selected two vials at last and went back over to Hermione's bed. The one he dropped in her lap was a pale blue color, at distinct odds with the purple ones that she had been given earlier by Pomfrey. "That's a very low level numbing potion. It will take most of the pain away without making you feel like you've overdosed on medication."

"Thanks..." Without touching the vial, she watched him drink the dark blue potion that he'd retrieved from himself. It must have helped, because the lines of pain smoothed from his face, and he was able to rotate his left arm, though he winced at one point. Glancing down at her lap, she scooped the vial up and hesitated. Her mind was screaming at her that this was Draco Malfoy, and that he could hardly be trusted to give her something that wasn't poison, but her instincts told her that the potion was safe. Her ankle gave a particularly vicious twinge of pain, making the decision for her. There

was no way she was going to sit around waiting for Pomfrey in pain if she didn't have to be. Hermione popped the cork off, placed the vial to her lips, and drank. The taste of blueberries mixed with a hint of something distinctly unpleasant spread across her tongue and she shuddered.

Draco had returned to his bed while she was making up her mind and was now perched on the edge, watching. Hermione set the vial on her nightstand and was surprised to feel that the potion was going to work already. The pain in her ankle was lessening to the point where she could twitch her toes without wanting to cry out in agony, which was a serious improvement. It was still there, but much more manageable, and she didn't feel like she was losing touch with the world, either. There was no doubt that Draco really knew what he was doing with potions. She shot a quick glance at him from the corner of her eye.

"That helped," she stated quietly, her voice more sincere. "Thank you."

He nodded silently in response, his eyes fixed on the curtain where Snape and Pomfrey had gone. "What's wrong with your friend?"

"I don't know," Hermione replied. This Draco wasn't nearly as bad as the normal Malfoy, but she still wasn't going to be telling him any secrets. "I just hope it's nothing too serious."

"I was with Snape when Greengrass came running," Draco said absently. "She was really upset. Kept saying that..." His voice trailed off for a brief second before it came back. "... didn't look well." A puzzled frown crossed his face.

"Greengrass? You mean Daphne Greengrass?" said Hermione, shocked. As far as she knew, Daphne Greengrass was a cold, cruel girl who took delight in making other people unhappy. The day she helped anyone, much less a Gryffindor, was the day that the sun fell out of the sky. She ignored Draco's puzzled reaction to being unable to call Ginny a Weasley.

"No, her younger sister," he answered. "I think her name is Astoria."

Hermione wasn't familiar with Astoria Greengrass. The name struck a bell, but other than knowing that the girl was in Ginny's year and

related to Daphne Greengrass, she was coming up empty. Silence fell over the Hospital Wing again. Draco was muttering to himself, his eyes narrowed in concentration, and Hermione glanced back down at her book. She hated to admit it, but for once, the prospect of more research was not exciting. Even Hermione Granger could only spend so much time with books before she lost it, and having the chance to talk to someone different was actually kind of nice.

She cast another glance at Draco and decided that she had to ask. "What happened to your arm?"

"Hmm?" Draco blinked and glanced over at her. "Oh, I got in the way of a slicing curse. Snape fixed me up but there was additional bruising to the muscles around the wound, and he didn't have any more of the potion that I needed. He said he's been way behind on his brewing lately."

"I see." Hermione's brow furrowed as she filed this information away for later perusal. She found it interesting that Draco had specifically not said just whose slicing curse he'd gotten in front of. If it had been a Gryffindor or Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw, he would have been shouting it from the rooftops. He was always gunning for the chance to play the injured victim. Did that mean it had been a Slytherin? It was tempting to ask, but she knew that he would never give her an answer. "Are you okay?"

A surprised look crossed his face. "I didn't think you'd care."

"Just because you're an arse doesn't mean I want you to be in pain," said Hermione, frowning. "Plus, you helped me with the pain potion."

"I'll be fine, Granger. That was the potion I needed, so there's no need for me to stick around here." He cast a glance at the curtains. "I was going to wait for Professor Snape to be finished, but now I think that they might be a while. I'm going to go ahead to dinner. Would you..." Draco paused and frowned, as though asking her for anything hurt. "Would you tell him where I've gone if he asks?"

"Of course," she answered, a little pleased that he had asked. "Have a good dinner, Malfoy."

"Feel better, Granger," he muttered, a light flush spreading across his face. He walked hastily over to the door of the Hospital Wing and

nearly ran right into Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall. Hermione half-expected him to complain about the slicing curse, but he didn't. If anything, he looked panicked at the sight of Dumbledore, and quickly rushed past the two professors before either of them could say anything. Dumbledore frowned deeply but allowed Draco to go. The fact that both of the professors hurried over to and disappeared behind the curtain where Ginny was worried Hermione even more and she desperately wished for some Expendable Ears so that she could hear what was going on. Not knowing was worse than anything, but she didn't have a choice at that moment.

NIR

Bright lights and the sound of soft voices woke Ginny. For a moment, she remained still, her eyes closed, and tried to remember what had happened. She could tell from the feel of the soft but stiff bedding beneath her fingers that she was in the Hospital Wing. Had a training session between her and her friends gotten out of hand? Sometimes Hannah had the tendency to let herself get a little out of control. But no – nothing on her body hurt anywhere, not even with that remembered, phantom pain that usually lingered for a day or two even after Madame Pomfrey had done her best. So what then?

She made an attempt to move and felt her hand come into contact with her wand, which had been resting on the bed beside her. Just like that, the memories swept over her in a rush, and she realized that she had done it. Her name was no longer "Ginny Weasley"; she was just "Ginny". Amazed, she opened her eyes slowly and blinked up at the ceiling. White. Just as she had thought, she was in the Hospital Wing. Astoria must have either brought her there or alerted someone after she'd passed out. One of the more detailed books that she had read had noted that the ritual required a lot of magical energy, and that nine out of ten people fainted, which was actually merciful as some of the resulting changes could be rather painful. Ginny felt perfectly fine, though, except for the slight headache that was throbbing in her temples, and even that began to disappear as she levered her hands underneath her body and started to push herself into a sitting position. When she saw who was sitting there, however, she froze.

Arthur Weasley was seated in a chair pulled up right next to her bed. His face was tense and anxious, but he didn't appear overly

surprised to see that she was awake. He made no move to help her sit up. She leaned back against her pillows and stared at him for a long moment, realizing for the first time that the ritual really had worked. Ginny felt nothing towards this man who had once been her father; she could clearly remember loving him and feeling safe around him, but those feelings were like stories she had once been told... distant and empty. Perhaps he felt the same way, for there was no warmth in his eyes when he glanced at her.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"I'm okay," Ginny said, smoothing down her hair nervously. "What time is it?"

"Just after eight in the morning. Madame Pomfrey gave you a potion to make sure that you'd sleep all night. She thought you needed the rest. Your..." His voice dropped out on him. "And I..." Here, he paused, and his brow furrowed before he went on. "We were able to sense what you'd done as soon as it happened. Molly was already on her way here when I arrived. Professor Dumbledore contacted that witch, Kelley Moore, from the Ministry of Magic in hopes that something could be done to reverse it, but she says that there's nothing we can do. You've legally disowned yourself and destroyed all of the bonds between us and you."

Even though she had already known that she'd been successful, it was still a rush, hearing someone actually say it out loud. Ginny smiled, not bothering to mention that she would have been furious if they had found a way to reverse it. "I know," she said at last, belatedly realizing that Arthur was waiting for her to say something.

"Why, Ginny?" Arthur leaned forward, pain flashing in his blue eyes. He could vividly remember the day that Ginny had been born. She'd been so beautiful and perfect, his little baby girl, the one he had thought he would never have the chance to meet. Looking at her now, sitting all by herself on the hospital bed, she looked so small and fragile. So alone. She was a complete stranger to him, as though his little girl had died and a new, different woman had taken her place. The only reason he was there to see her was because he knew he was supposed to be, not because he felt any real desire to make sure she was okay. "Why did you do this?"

"I had to. You know what Ron did," Ginny said quietly, lifting her chin and gazing into his eyes. The magic had done its job well. She felt nothing. "I didn't want to do it, but... I couldn't bring myself to be okay with hating Harry."

There it was, the simple truth hanging in the air between them as he settled back in his chair. Arthur Weasley was normally an easy going man, but he couldn't keep himself from gritting his teeth in frustration. He and his wife had taken Harry Potter in with the intention of making him one of the family. But as it turned out, they had literally lost one of their children to him. Over the past week, he'd felt the subtle way that the magic was changing his feelings, but for the first time ever he felt an unexpected swell of hatred towards the Boy-Who-Lived for stealing his little girl away.

"I won't lie and say that I understand," he said finally, trying to control his emotions. If Ginny ever got wind of what he was feeling, she would be angry with him, and he didn't want to go through that. Not when things were already so bad between them. He didn't want to hate the woman who had once been his only daughter. "We're disappointed in your choice. I wish that you had spoken to us first."

Ginny didn't say anything. What could she tell him? She hadn't talked to her parents or to anyone besides Astoria because she'd been afraid that they would have tried to convince her otherwise. It had been her choice to make. Even now, sitting there in front of her father, she remained convinced that she had done the right thing, and that certainty in her eyes was all that Arthur Weasley needed to see. Abruptly, he shook his head and stood up, striding out of the curtained area without a word to her. Gazing after him in surprise, Ginny felt almost like she'd been slapped, even though he hadn't touched her. Was this how it would always be between her and her ex-family? Cold feelings and even colder looks because none of them could understand?

"What have I gotten myself into?" she muttered, tossing the covers on her bed back and getting to her feet. There was a mirror on her nightstand that she recognized as Luna's, meaning that her friends had been by to visit her. Pleased, Ginny picked it up and peered into the reflected glass. Instantly, she knew why Arthur had been so upset.

The books had all warned her that sometimes appearances could change when it came to a bond severance. According to one especially informed tome, it had something to do with the magical inheritance received by every wizarding child at birth, regardless of whether she or he was going to get another on their sixteenth birthday. Sirius' eyes had been gray when he was younger, but when he'd been disowned, his eyes had turned more of a silvery blue. Ginny had been expecting some changes, but not what she was looking at. Her hair was no longer that shade of orangey-red that had distinguished the Weasley family for generations. Instead, it had turned a darker, almost auburn shade, which complimented her paler complexion much better and matched her gold-flecked brown eyes.

"Oh boy," she said under her breath, placing the mirror back on her bedside table. She stood up and shivered, realizing that without the additional warmth of her bed covers, it was actually pretty chilly. Someone – Astoria? – had brought in a change of clothing and left it piled on the chair on the opposite side of her bed. Ginny stripped off the flimsy hospital gown that she was wearing and donned the plain gray skirt and loose blue sweater. The clothing was Hannah's which meant it didn't fit very well - Hannah was larger in the breast and hip area than Ginny was - but it would do until she could return to Gryffindor Tower. Even the shoes, which she recognized as Luna's, were a size too large. As she finished dressing and tied her hair back with a green ribbon, she wondered what had happened to the clothing and shoes she'd been wearing when she'd passed out. Hopefully they had just been sent to the house elves for cleaning. With no money to her name except what little she had in her trunk, she'd need to make what she had last even longer than before.

Ready to face the world, she pulled open the curtains and peeked out, half-expecting to see a full Hospital Wing. She was relieved to note that the curtains around Ron's bed were drawn tightly shut and that the rest of the Wing was mostly empty. Madame Pomfrey was nowhere to be seen, meaning she could have a quick escape. Ginny took a couple of steps out from behind the curtain and found herself staring at the one obstacle she hadn't counted on: Hermione, who had sat up the instant she heard Ginny make a sound. The two girls just stared at each other for a moment, each taking the other one in.

"How are you feeling, Hermione?" Ginny asked finally, breaking the silence. Hermione's face was pale and pinched with pain. Her foot,

still propped up on a few pillows, looked misshapen and curiously flat. Clearly Madame Pomfrey had begun the work of vanishing the bone. The next step, Skele-Grow, was unpleasant at best and painful at worst.

"Not too badly," Hermione said carefully. "All things considered, I mean. How are you?"

Ginny started to make a flippant remark, but stopped when she saw the obvious concern in Hermione's deep brown eyes. Instead, she moved across the floor and sat down in the chair. "I've been better," she admitted, not quite daring to look into Hermione's face. "...". Her voice dropped out on her when she attempted to call Arthur "Dad", and she sighed in frustration. "Arthur was here earlier. He was angry with me, I think."

"I saw him storm out," she said softly, studying Ginny. "I like how your hair looks."

"Thanks," Ginny said with a tiny smile, fingering the end of her ponytail.

"Was it... weird?" asked Hermione after a beat of silence. She fiddled with the end of her quill, looking mildly embarrassed by her question. "Being around your..." Her voice died out and she rolled her eyes. "Around Arthur."

"It's kind of hard to explain," Ginny said after a moment. "I feel... lighter. When I was looking at Arthur, it was like I felt nothing towards him at all. Like he's a stranger. I can remember loving him as a father and all that, but it's like... like something I once dreamed about, or a story someone told me. Those emotions don't even feel real."

Hermione bit her lip. "Doesn't that upset you?"

She thought for a long minute, trying to analyze her feelings and put them into words someone else could understand. "Not at the moment," she said slowly. "I feel bad because he was upset with me. It panics me to know that I don't have any source of income, and to know that he won't provide for me anymore. But otherwise... I broke all of the bonds, so maybe the spell takes care of the missing them part, too." Ginny shrugged helplessly. "Maybe later, once I've had a

chance to get used to things, I'll feel the worse for it. But honestly, I guess right now it's more overwhelming than anything else."

An awkward silence fell between the two of them and was broken only when Hermione shifted and sighed. "I was worried about you when Professor Snape brought you in," she said finally. "He was very upset."

"Do they all know?" inquired Ginny, sounding dismayed. She hadn't stopped to think about what the public reaction might be in regards to the fact that she had disowned herself. It was widely considered to be a last resort and was practically unheard of. Now she found herself dreading what would happen when people like Rita Skeeter got a hold of the news. Ginny, the Weasleys, and Harry Potter would be the subject of gossip for days.

"I think so," Hermione said apologetically. "Professor Dumbledore, certainly, and likely Professor McGonagall. It's not the sort of thing that Snape would have kept from either one of them. But you know, you'll hardly be able to keep it quiet for long, Ginny. Someone will notice at some point, probably sooner rather than later. As it was, when Malfoy was in here earlier, he tried calling you "Weasley" and couldn't. I tried not to let on that I noticed, but I think that it made him wonder. I'm not sure he realizes that you're not a Weasley anymore, but that's the logical explanation that everyone will come to eventually."

"Spoken like you think a Slytherin could be logical," Ginny said with a weak smile, who knew just how intelligent Slytherins could be if Astoria was any indication. The enormity of what she had done was beginning to sink in, but she didn't want to show Hermione that she was becoming alarmed. She shifted in the seat and tried for a casual tone. "Has Ron found out? Or Harry?"

"Ron doesn't know. There will be an explosion when he does." Hermione grimaced at the thought. As much as she loved her boyfriend, his temper often got on her nerves, particularly as of late. She didn't appreciate being yelled at, and was pretty sure that Ron would be looking for a scapegoat once he found out what Ginny had done. There was no way Harry would let Ron anywhere near Ginny, which meant that she would be the obvious (and oh-so-lucky) target. "I don't think that Harry knows, either. I expect he'd have come to

talk to me, or at least to visit you, and he hasn't been around." She glanced at Ginny. "Did you want to tell him?"

"I don't know. I don't want him to feel weird," she said uncertainly. "I did this partly for him, but that's not the only reason. I want him to still be my friend. He's one of the only things I have left."

"Oh, Ginny," said Hermione softly.

Ginny blinked at her, wondering why her friend sounded so compassionate and concerned, and belatedly realized that at some point, a single tear had slipped down her cheek without her notice. She quickly lifted a hand to brush it away and saw that her hands were actually shaking, even though she was no longer cold. Quite the opposite, actually. It now seemed to be quite hot in the room. A low, choked sound caught in her throat before it could escape, and she pressed her fingers to her lips to hold anything else in. Breaking down in front of Astoria was one thing, but she hadn't wanted Hermione to see her cry.

Looking sympathetic, Hermione scooted over, ignoring the flash of pain from her ankle, and patted the bed beside her. Ginny stood up and joined Hermione on the bed without much more urging, curling up into the brunette's side. Hermione drew the blankets over the two of them and held her younger friend, trying to hide how disturbed she was by how hard Ginny was trembling, though her friend wasn't crying. Her skin was icy cold, and although she had a fierce grip on Hermione's shoulders, her eyes showed that she was a million miles away. Deeply worried, Hermione rocked her until Ginny fell into a restless sleep, trying in vain to offer what little comfort she could give.

Please review!

A/N: Just a quick note, I hope that this doesn't bother anyone, but this story will contain Remus/Sirius slash. Nothing overly graphic, but I give fair warning. It's been up on my profile concerning this story for ages, but I doubt that everyone has actually visited my profile to check for things like that. I'm sorry for anyone who was hoping for Remus/Tonks shipping. There will be some, but it's definitely one-sided for Tonks. I adore R/S and I think it's practically canon; in my opinion, the only reason Tonks had a chance was because Sirius died. As you know, he's alive in this story, so that's just how it is. Enjoy!

The painful sensation of someone grabbing a hold of her shoulders and shaking her hard was what woke Ginny out of her fitful sleep. She'd been having the strangest dream about a green scarf that someone else was wearing and which she desperately wanted, and at first when she opened her eyes, she was puzzled by the fact that it was a man with red hair standing over her, not a blonde girl wearing a green scarf. Then her sleepy mind caught up with her eyes and she realized that the man was, in fact, a rather enraged Ronald Weasley, whose face was a deep shade of red bordering on purple that looked most unpleasant with his hair. His blue eyes were blazing and his fingers were digging into her shoulders so tightly that it actually hurt.

"Ron!" Hermione shouted somewhere behind them. "What do you think you're – "

"Mr Weasley!" Professor McGonagall thundered, racing into the room. "Unhand Miss Ginevra this instant!" She made a quick movement with her wand that jerked Ron backwards. Ginny flinched as his nails tore through her skin, leaving five bloody, stinging cuts on each shoulder. Ron was thrown into a chair across the Hospital Wing. Before he had the chance to get up, he found a furious professor looming over him. "Move from that seat before the Headmaster arrives, Mr Weasley, and I assure you that you will regret it."

Ron was breathing hard, almost gasping for air. He made an attempt to look around Professor McGonagall at Ginny, but the woman was pointedly blocking his way. Ginny took the chance to glance around quickly, trying to understand what was happening. Aside from Ron and Professor McGonagall, the only other person in the room was Hermione, who judging by the curiously misshapen look of her foot,

was still confined to bed. That changed, however, when the Floo in the far corner of the Hospital Wing flared green, and Professor Dumbledore, accompanied by Arthur and Molly Weasley, emerged. Molly hurried over to her son immediately.

"I must ask that you not lose your temper again, Mr Weasley," Professor Dumbledore said, looking deeply displeased with Ron's actions. "There was a reason that our conversation was taking place in my office, and I confess, I do not appreciate it when students leave before they are dismissed."

Normally, Dumbledore's ire would have been more than enough to take the wind out of Ron's sails. Not this time. "But she sided with him, sir!" he protested. "I know he's done something to her. That's got to be the only explanation for why a good girl like Ginny would chose a bastard like Potter. She's my sister. I have to help her get free of his control!"

"Ginevra is no longer your sister," said Dumbledore calmly. "And Harry was not and is not controlling her. As I was trying to explain to you, there is no magic in this world that could force someone to break a bond that they did not want to break." He frowned faintly as he spoke, and Hermione and Ginny exchanged looks. "Madame Pomfrey has run tests for every compulsion charm, spell, and potion that we know of, and every single one came up negative. It was done of her own free will, and that is something that you are going to have to learn to accept."

Ginny frowned slightly, unsure of what bothered her more: that Pomfrey had been running tests without permission while she was asleep, or the fact that she suspected Dumbledore still hadn't figured out what was wrong with Ron. Not that it mattered anymore, since Ron was no longer brother. She pushed the covers on her bed back and swung her legs over the side, attracting the attention of Molly, Arthur, and Ron, who tried to jump up again. Professor McGonagall had her wand out instantly, though it proved not to be required as Arthur placed a hand on Ron's shoulder in an effort to both calm and restrain him.

"How could you?" Ron demanded, glaring at Ginny. "How could you side with that bastard? How could you betray our family like that? He's evil, Ginny. Has he poisoned your mind? Or did he finally allow you to spread your legs for him and –"

"Mr Weasley!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed.

Her face flushing with anger, Ginny narrowed her eyes. "Yes, Ron, how could I have chosen Harry when you're the epitome of a wonderful human being?" she said sarcastically. "You want to know the truth? I agonized over losing everyone in the family except for you. No longer being recognized as your sister was the best thing about this spell!"

"You little bitch," Ron spat, his hand instinctively flying to his pocket and drawing forth his wand. Only the fact that the four adults were still in the room kept him from casting a curse.

"Truth hurts," Ginny said coldly, and what she had spoken really was the truth: she missed the Ron she'd grown up with, the boy who had once been her dearest friend, but the man sitting in front of her and staring at her with such hatred had become a stranger long before she'd broken the bonds. Looking at him now, she couldn't even remember what it was like to feel love or affection for him; the way she felt towards Ron was completely different from how she felt about Molly or Arthur or her other brothers. How could she feel even the memory of love for someone who could look at her with such pure venom and hatred? She was certain that if it weren't for the professors, Ron would have attacked her again.

"Disgusting," muttered Ron, shaking his head. "You've turned your back on the Light. I had thought better of you, but I guess some dark taints can never be washed off," he added meaningfully. Ginny turned pale at the reference to her second year as he continued, "But I hope you're happy with him, Ginevra. You've ruined your future. Someday, when he leaves you high and dry, don't come crawling back, understand?"

"Believe me, I don't want anything from you, now or ever," she replied, folding her arms. The movement pulled at the wounds on her shoulders and she grimaced in pain as fresh blood began to trickle down her back. "I would rather starve in the street than ask for anything from you, Ronald Weasley. I'm not sure what's wrong with you, but I'm sick of the way you're acting. It's like we don't even know you anymore! I was ashamed to be your sister, and quite frankly, I'm glad that I no longer have that title."

Ron turned white and then flushed red with rage. Before anyone else could say anything, he threw off Arthur's hand, rose to his feet, and stormed out of the room. Molly sighed and hurried after him without casting a single look at either her husband or her ex-daughter. Arthur sank down into the chair that his son had vacated and looked depressed. Hermione, who had been watching the scene in silence, was anxiously scribbling something down on a piece of parchment. Dumbledore and McGonagall exchanged concerned glances. Ginny sank down onto the edge of her bed, wishing that everyone else would leave so that she could do something about the deep scratches on her arms. She didn't know what Ron had been into, but the ten wounds burned like anything every time she so much as moved.

"Albus," said Arthur, breaking the silence. "Isn't there anything you can do?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I told you, I've already contacted Ms. Moore, Arthur. She tells me that the ritual was been officially recorded at the Ministry, which means that it was performed correctly. You know there is no way to break a disowning once it has been completed. Just like there was no way for us to undo what young Ronald did, there is no way to reverse this."

"I wouldn't want it to be reversed," interrupted Ginny, glancing between Arthur and Dumbledore. "I chose to do this. I thought about what it would mean for a long time. I know it's probably hard for you to understand, but..." Her voice trailed off, because she could see from the way Arthur was looking at her that he didn't understand. Most likely, he never would. She swallowed hard and glanced down, unable to meet the condemnation in his eyes.

"Come, Arthur. I'm sure you're anxious to check on Ron and your wife," said Dumbledore, placing a hand on the man's shoulder. Arthur nodded wordlessly and stood up, following the headmaster out of the room without so much as a glance back.

"How are you feeling, Miss..." Professor McGonagall's voice trailed off abruptly and she sighed. "Ginevra. I apologize. It will be some time before we remember that you are no longer a Weasley. For the time being, the fact that you can't be referred to as a Weasley will help, but I'm afraid that it means your secret will be out to the rest of the Wizarding World sooner rather than later." She studied her

student for a moment, her keen eyes taking in every detail. "Do you feel well enough to leave the Hospital Wing? Madame Pomfrey says that there is nothing physically wrong with you, so you may leave, but if you wanted to stay here for an extra night that would be fine."

"No, I'm okay. I really just want to try and get back into a normal life," Ginny replied quietly. "I don't want to miss any more courses. If that's alright with you, Professor."

"Of course," said McGonagall, her expression softening slightly. "In spite of your desire to not fall behind, I must suggest that you not attend classes for the rest of the week. Madame Pomfrey is concerned that it would be too much for you. Furthermore, for the time being, I suggest that you do what you can to avoid Mr Weasley, until he has come to terms with your choice. If you find that you are having difficulties in any way, I urge you to come to me at any time."

"Thank you," said Ginny, inclining her head. She stood up and glanced at Hermione. "I'll come visit you later on, okay?"

Hermione nodded, realizing that Ginny didn't want to have a conversation in front of their professor. That was fine with her. "I'll be looking forward to it," she said with a half-smile. She wished more than anything that she could have been there to support Ginny during the next few hours, but even though her ankle was well on the way to being mended, it would be another day or so before Madame Pomfrey would even think about releasing her.

Totally aware of the two sets of eyes on her, Ginny straightened her shoulders and walked out of the Hospital Wing with her head held high, pretending like the scratches weren't bothering her at all. She would likely have at least a day or two before the rest of the world caught on to the fact that she had disowned herself, and in the meantime, she would need to put the best face forward that she could. The Weasley family name hadn't been regarded as particularly prestigious, but with no name at all, she would be regarded as even less than a muggleborn by any pureblood and even some half-blood students. It wouldn't be good if anyone outside of her circle of friends found out that she was the least bit upset by her decision.

Fortunately, classes were in, so Ginny didn't have to worry about running into anyone right away on her way back to Gryffindor Tower.

She was looking forward to a long, hot shower and putting on some clothes that actually fit as she spoke the password and climbed inside of the portrait, so she was completely unprepared for the strong set of arms that practically lifted her off of her feet. Ginny squeaked in surprise and pain as Bill Weasley hugged her so hard that it actually hurt. The instant her feet touched the ground, the twins were upon her, practically smothering her in an embrace. It took her a long moment to wriggle out of their grip, and then she backed away from the three of them, amazed.

"What..." she said, stunned. "What are you doing here?"

"You honestly didn't think that we'd come visit after finding out what'd you done?" said Fred, giving her a cheeky smile. "Come now, baby sister, you know better than that."

Ginny felt a pang, though she tried to smother it. Bill, Charlie, and especially the twins had always been her favourite brothers. She could vividly remember running to Bill's and Charlie's room in the middle of the night when a bad dream awoke her, or giggling for hours with the twins when they'd cooked up some new prank to play on Ron or Percy. Standing in front of them knowing that she was no longer their sister hurt even worse than confronting Arthur and Molly, and she lowered her head, unable to look them in their eyes. They were strangers to her and she felt nothing for them, that was true, but remembering what she had once shared with them hurt.

"I'm not your sister anymore," she admitted softly.

George looped an arm around her shoulders. "If you think we're going to let some spell dictate whether or not you're our baby sister, you've obviously lost your mind along with your family status," he joked.

"Really?" she asked hopefully, glancing around at all three of them. She found herself smiling hopefully when all three of them nodded. Perhaps they would never share the love and affection that had once bond them together, but maybe a memory of that joy could be enough. "I'm glad. I thought for ages before I made the decision, but I guess it didn't really prepare me for how hard it would be."

"And Charlie feels the same way," added Fred, ruffling her hair.

"No word from Percy," continued George.

"But he's a big old git anyway," they concluded together.

Bill sat down on one of the plush scarlet couches and looked at her seriously. "I've heard some wild tales from Ron about Harry poisoning your mind and encouraging you to betray us, and Mum thinks you've gone off your rocker. Dad seems to be under the impression that Harry's stolen you away from us. I've come to hear the real story, Ginny. What made you decide to do this?"

"Do you want the real truth?" Ginny said, taking a seat across from him. She clenched her fists loosely in her lap as she spoke. "I just couldn't do it, Bill. You know that I've..." Her voice trailed off and she blushed faintly.

Fred decided to help. He grinned wickedly and said, "Been head over heels for Harry since the day you were born?"

"Yes, thank you," said Ginny, glaring at him. "I love Harry. You know that. We were some of the only supporters that he had in this world. I didn't think it was fair that he should lose us just because Ron's been acting barmy. I wanted to be with him more than I wanted to be a Weasley." She looked down at her hands, knowing that if there anyone she could be completely honest with, it was the three men sitting in front of her. "And... I knew what my life would be like if I stayed a part of the family. Always having to give in to Mum if I didn't want a massive argument and following Dad's path for me. I didn't want that for myself. I owe it to me to find out what else is out there."

"Agreed, but you didn't have to go so far," muttered Fred.

"Couldn't you have just moved to the other side of the world?" added George.

"Ginny, don't you realize what you've done? That's a long way to go for some independence," Bill said, ignoring the twins entirely. He was desperate for answers.

"It's not just about that, Bill," Ginny said, frustrated. "Didn't you hear me? I'm in love with Harry and I wanted to be with him even if he never wants to be with me. I know you've always thought that I just had a crush on him, but it's not like that. I couldn't bear the thought

of hating him." She dropped her eyes. "Now when I know it's not supposed to be like that. If Ron had just kept his stupid mouth shut and never started this whole thing, we wouldn't be in this mess. But I guess that was just too hard for him!" Rising, she quickly walked over to one of the windows. As her back was to the three Weasley brothers, she didn't notice the looks of surprise that they exchanged at the anger in her voice. It was clear to all three of them that Ginny was well on her way to hating Ron.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," said George, sounding unusually serious. "It's not right that you had to do this."

"We're sorry that Ron is such a prick," Fred told her.

She turned around and smiled weakly. "I know. I know that this affects all of us and that I should have talked to you first. I know that it's hard for you to understand. I know that maybe I made the wrong choice. But it's my choice, and I have to stick by it whether it's right or wrong. I hate the fact that it meant losing all of you, but..."

Bill stood up, headed over to her, and hugged her for a second time. "You could never lose us."

Ginny pressed her face into his chest and fought back tears. It was harder than she had expected, facing her brothers, and Charlie and Percy weren't even there. They had been such a big part of her life for so long that it was hard to wrap her mind around the fact that technically, she no longer had any right to be with them. The bonds between her and them had been severed, and would remain that way unless one of them chose to be disowned as well - which wasn't a likely scenario. She had to remind herself that the only reason Bill was hugging her was because he remembered a time when he had loved her, not because he loved her right then. It was enough to make what joy she would've gotten out of the embrace vanish, and she gently disentangled herself.

"Thanks for coming here to talk to me," she said quietly, refusing to look up at him as she dried her tears. "I was afraid that you would hate me."

"Just because we can't love you doesn't mean we would ever hate you," Bill told her, ruffling her hair in a way that he knew she hated. He grinned when she glared up at him. "Like the twins said, you're

our baby sister no matter what the bonds or the Book say. That's never going to change, kiddo. I'm afraid that you're stuck with us."

"I can live with that," Ginny said, giving him a half-hearted smile. She couldn't help wondering how long that would be true for. What if they got sick of or began to hate her? How long could the memories of their childhood sustain such an awkward relationship for? Would there come a time when the fact that they couldn't love her matter more than what they had once shared? The knowledge that it wasn't enough, that it would never be enough, hit hard. A shiver passed through her body and she loosely wrapped her arms around herself. Suddenly, she was chilled, and she knew it had nothing to do with the outside temperature.

NIR

Remus Lupin set aside the letter that he had been reading and leaned forward, resting his head upon his hand. He had a dreadful headache and the rather depressing news from Tonks wasn't doing anything to make it better. Although he had stopped reading before he got to the end, he knew what the last few paragraphs of her letter would say. She would encourage him to write to Harry and tactfully mention that it would be good for the both of them, even if Remus was often out of reach. No matter how many times he pointedly ignored her advice, she stubbornly saw fit to offer it over and over again. It was enough to make him wish that his mission for Dumbledore would go on for another couple of weeks at least, but unfortunately, he would be returning to London the next morning... and he would be empty-handed when he did.

Heaving a frustrated sigh, he glanced at the letter again, quickly scanning the parchment for anything he might have missed the first time. The Death Eaters and Voldemort had been suspiciously quiet as of late. Rita Skeeter was still trying to fan the flames of the Potter and Weasley bond severance, but with nothing fresh to report, it was starting to become old news already. There was a new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor starting at Hogwarts the very next day, after over a week of Dumbledore teaching the class whenever he had the time to spare. Remus smiled wryly, hoping that the new professor would have more luck than he'd had. Finally, she'd written that Severus Snape had been in even more of a bad mood than normal, and that she was trying to stay out of his way after he'd hexed her for tripping over the umbrella stand again. That made

Remus roll his eyes. Whenever Severus was in a rotten mood, he had the tendency to take it out on whoever was around that he hated most. No doubt Harry and the rest of the students were having a wonderful time at Hogwarts.

"Bloody Slytherins," he muttered with no real heat, shaking his head. He would have written Tonks back, but he was leaving in the next four or five hours, and he would arrive before the owl had a chance to give a letter to her. Instead, he folded the letter and tucked it carefully into his robes. Doing so dislodged the roll of parchment that Dumbledore had given him, and it fell to the floor. He glanced down at it, knowing that there was no use in keeping it, but reluctant to throw it out.

Lately, Dumbledore's missions had involved tracking down the rogue werewolf packs that existed in Europe and trying to convince them to side with the Light instead of the Dark. Remus had never realized just how many smaller werewolf packs had evaded the Ministry radar, and he had no idea how Dumbledore was finding them all. He had no problem in approaching them – most of people tended to be very welcoming when they realized he was a werewolf as well – but he rarely had success. What could the Light offer werewolves? When most of them saw Remus, who had been out of work for well over two years and whose best clothing was often in shoddy shape, they weren't exactly jumping at the bit to return with him. If anything, they usually tried to encourage him to stay with them. Morality and ethics weren't exactly a huge selling point when parents had young children to feed and a dark wizard offering them wild, but long sought after promises.

The mission he had just been on had been especially difficult, as it was an entire family: father, mother, and three children: a teenager about Harry's age and two younger kids. Apparently, the teen had been bitten when he was only ten years old, and had infected his entire family on the first full moon when his parents didn't take the appropriate cautions. For nearly six years, the five of them had lived in the wild, after being cast out of the village where they had made their home when their lycanthropy had been discovered. Remus had never even had a chance in convincing them to return to London with him; the father had already been swayed by Voldemort's promises, and seeing Remus had really only pushed him into the dark side's embrace that much faster. He hadn't wanted to hear that

Voldemort was a liar, and Remus had been forced to give up, knowing that his warnings were falling on deaf ears.

Swearing softly under his breath, Remus stood up and walked over to the window. It was nearing the date of the full moon, and his body was already beginning to feel the pull of the werewolf. By the time he returned to London, he would have just enough time to make his report to Dumbledore before he would have to consume the Wolfsbane and rest up. Being overwhelmed or stressed had the tendency to make full moons that much more difficult on him; as it was, werewolves were not meant to be solitary creatures, and that made the transformations painful enough as it was. The wolf longed for its mate and couldn't understand where Sirius had gone. He leaned against the cold glass and closed his eyes as he took a deep breath. More than ever, he would have given anything to be going home to Sirius. Things had been much simpler when, at the end of the day, he could retire to bed in Sirius's arms and feel completely safe. Now his nights were spent tossing and turning, with little to no actual sleep.

"Fucking hell," he said out loud, returning to his seat and slumping into the chair. He stared up at the ceiling, trying hard not to think about that poor family who was seeking safety in Voldemort, of all people, and wondered how it had all gone so wrong.

Please review!

A/N: Several of the reviews made me laugh. You guys are just too funny! Don't worry. Here is exactly what you've all been waiting for. Harry's reaction! I thought about what he would act like for a long time before I wrote this chapter. It's important to me that my characters remain in character, and I hope that this chapter reflects that. Also, I've had a few questions popping up about Sirius and how he survived. That won't be explained in detail until later, sorry, but the circumstances are hinted at. I hope that will tide you over. This chapter is extra long, so enjoy!

Headmaster Albus Dumbledore glanced out over the staff room and waved his hand for silence once everyone had a cup of coffee or tea, causing the assembled professors to turn towards him with curious looks. It was rare for the Hogwarts staff to have a meeting before breakfast, as most of them had more free time after classes were finished for the day, but this was a special - and very important - occasion. He cast them all a broad smile and indicated the man that was standing beside him. Nearly a week after their original talk in Dumbledore's office, Chance Astrum was finally gracing Hogwarts with his presence. The slender young man grinned cockily and tossed the staff a genial wave that made Professor Snape scowl. Chance's smirk grew even wider, and Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled at the reaction.

"As you know, our previous Defence Against the Dark Arts professor fled the building without giving us any warning," he explained. "I've had some difficulty procuring someone else for the position. Fortunately, one of my younger friends agreed to step in and teach for the remainder of the year so that the Ministry wouldn't have a chance to slip another Dolores Umbridge into our midst. I'd like to introduce you all to Professor Chance Astrum."

"I assume there is a reason that we are having this meeting so early beyond meeting a new professor, Headmaster? I do have delicate potions brewing that require a great deal of my care," said Severus, eyeing Chance with no small amount of distaste as scattered, welcoming applause filled the room. From what he could tell, Chance seemed like a Gryffindor, which meant that Severus had no use for him.

"Yes, Severus, there was," said Dumbledore patiently, used to the younger man's brisk demeanour. He took a sip from his cup of tea

and cleared his throat. "I have an announcement regarding the situation between young Mr Potter and the Weasley family."

Severus and Minerva exchanged looks. Neither of them were surprised that Dumbledore was choosing to let the staff in ahead of time. It was only a matter of days, possibly hours, before word got out. There were a lot of hints that someone was bound to pick up on. However, since they weren't looking forward to the inevitable storm of chaos that would occur when news of Ginny's disowning flooded the wizarding world, they weren't sure they wanted Dumbledore to share. The more people that knew, the bigger a risk that the truth would spread that much more quickly, and some of the staff members were gossips.

"What is it, Albus?" asked Filius curiously. "Have they found a way to repair the bonds?"

"You know that can't be done," said Severus, rolling his eyes. Honestly, he was convinced that he worked with idiots sometimes. "Once the bonds are broken, that's it."

"I'm afraid Severus is correct, Filius. The familial bond is still severed. However, what I have gathered you all here to tell you is that the bonds to one particular Weasley have not been broken. Or should I say, an ex-Weasley." Dumbledore watched Chance closely as he spoke, and saw the younger man's head snap up. "Young Miss Ginevra chose to disown herself from the Weasley family rather than allow the bonds between her and Mr Potter to be destroyed."

A stunned silence fell over the room. Chance's face went pale and he sank back against his chair heavily, a reaction that Severus noticed and filed away to ponder at a later time. Everyone else in the room simply looked stunned for a moment. Then, in the next instant, a babble of voices expressing amazement and shock spilled across the room. Dumbledore allowed this to go on for a few minutes as he listened calmly to the reactions. Most of the professors were merely surprised, but a few - most notably Rolanda Hooch and Aurora Sinistra - were horrified by what the disowning would mean for Ginny's future.

After several minutes, Dumbledore spoke up again. "The point to my sharing this vital information with you is so that we can be prepared for when the rest of the students find out. Miss Ginevra will need our

help and possibly our protection in the face of the inquiries she is bound to face from both students and the outside world. I'm afraid some of her classmates in particular may receive the news less than favourably." A few professors glanced at Severus, and he sneered back at them as Dumbledore continued, "Being that it will only be a matter of time before the truth is found out, I have decided to announce it tonight at dinner."

"Albus!" Minerva protested immediately. "Did you ask Miss Ginevra if she would be okay with that?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled again. "Having reflected deeply on the topic, Minerva, I have decided that it best. Always get the jump on your enemy as opposed to waiting for the shoe to fall."

"Have you even told Harry yet?" she demanded.

"That is being taken care of as we speak," he replied calmly. "I believe that young Miss Granger is currently speaking to him in the Hospital Wing. Besides, Harry will not be present for dinner. He has requested permission to go to Diagon Alley to visit Gringotts, and after some thought, I have agreed that it will be safe for him to go. He wants to look at the Black family vault, and since he didn't have a chance to visit Diagon Alley this summer, I find it only fair that he be allowed to do so. He will be well escorted," he added with a significant look at Severus and Minerva. Both of them nodded silently. "Minerva, if you wish to give Miss Ginevra advance warning of the announcement at dinner, I urge you to do so."

Minerva pressed her lips together, struggling to hide her disapproval. "I will."

"I just can't believe it," said Pomona after a moment, shaking her head. "That poor little girl. What about her future? She has nothing now. Not even a family name to fall back on."

"I'm sure she will get by just fine," Severus said coldly. There had been many times when his own name had worked against him, so he saw no reason why Ginny couldn't rise above the problems she had caused for herself. He had difficulty believing she had given up so much for a spoiled boy like Harry Potter, but then again, he'd never even attempt to understand the mentality of a Gryffindor. They were just weird, and no doubt it would give him a headache.

"Yes, she will, but she will need what help we can give her." Dumbledore glanced out the window and then looked at his staff. "It is just about time for breakfast, so I suppose we shall adjourn. Please make it an effort to treat Miss Ginevra the same as you always have. Also, be aware that as per Poppy's orders she will not be attending her classes for the rest of the week."

The professors rose, murmuring amongst themselves, and left. Dumbledore cast strong privacy wards and turned back to Chance, who hadn't moved an inch since his announcement. He had purposely not told Chance about the problems between the Weasleys and the Potters, because he'd known that it would make Chance want to tell Harry who he really was - and that wouldn't work with Dumbledore's plans at all. Now that Chance knew that Harry had someone who was willing to stand by his side no matter what, he would be more willing to remain silent about the truth. It was all working out very well, and he was actually quite pleased with how things had turned out, though he made sure to hide that emotion from his face when Chance looked up at him.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Chance asked, distrust flickering in his eyes.

"You are not Harry's godfather anymore," Dumbledore told him calmly. "I considered telling you about the situation, but I was worried about your reaction. You know that it's imperative that Harry not know that you're alive. He and Voldemort still share a link, and if that information becomes available to Voldemort, it would eliminate our chance for a surprise attack."

An angry look flashed across Chance's face. "Fuck your surprise attack, Dumbledore. My godson just lost the only family that he had left. You had no right to keep that from me."

"Sirius, I apologize for not telling you, but I feel that it was best. Remember, it's for Harry's own safety that he believes you're dead. Or did you want Voldemort to be able to play the same trick on him a second time?" Dumbledore asked. When Chance winced at the comment, he softened. "I understand that you're having a hard time keeping this secret from Harry and Remus. Would it make you feel better to tell Remus the truth?"

Chance appeared to be surprised by the offer. His eyes narrowed suspiciously, though he was careful not to make eye contact with Dumbledore as he pondered his answer. Was this some kind of trap? You could never tell with Dumbledore. That's how he had gotten into this mess in the first place. Right after Dumbledore had saved his life, he'd been dazed enough to swear an Unbreakable Vow that as long as the man did his best to protect Harry, Sirius Black (or Chance Astrum) would abide by his decisions in regards to Harry Potter and the war in general. Unless he had proof that Dumbledore was deliberately putting Harry in danger, he would lose his magic if he told Harry or anyone else the truth if Dumbledore didn't give him permission to do so. Would telling Remus be playing into Dumbledore's plans?

"I'll think about it," he said at last.

"You do that," Dumbledore said pleasantly, finishing his cup of tea and rising to his feet. He took the wards down with a wave of his hand, not even bothering with his wand. It pleased him to watch the way Chance paled a little at the display of magic. "Come along. It's time for breakfast, and for the students to meet their new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor."

NIR

Being that she had been granted the rest of the week off from classes, Ginny had decided that it was time to make an effort at catching up on her schoolwork. Falling behind had the tendency to be disastrous, as most of the later classes in the curriculum would build upon the earlier ones. Instead of going to breakfast, she remained behind and started doing some research for a potions essay. She'd gotten about halfway through before she was interrupted by the return of several Gryffindor students; her roommates had brought her a couple of hot rolls, and while she ate, they gushed about the handsome new professor that had been introduced and insisted on giving her a complete head to toe description. Only when the Common Room finally emptied out was she been able to get back to work, but by then Ginny found herself unable to focus. Her thoughts kept wandering, which made it difficult to concentrate on an already boring potions essay.

"Bloody potions. Who cares about the different kinds of hellebore?" she mumbled, running a hand through her hair.

"I've often thought that myself."

"What the..." Ginny jumped, sending her parchment and book to the ground, and scrabbled for her wand at the same time, resulting in her nearly falling out of the chair. She heard the sound of familiar laughter and scowled, rolling her eyes as Harry pulled his invisibility cloak off of his shoulders. He was grinning, clearly amused by his little prank. "Very cute, Potter," she grumbled, straightening herself out. "I could've hexed you, you know."

"And just when did you plan to do that?" he teased. "Before or after you hit the floor?"

Ginny shot him a mock glare and tucked her wand into the waistband of her skirt. "Was there a reason you're pranking me, or were you just trying to have some fun at a poor girl's expense?" She knelt and began to collect her parchment, quill, and potions book. Thankfully, her research appeared to be mostly intact.

"I had a reason," Harry said, still smiling as he watched her. "I spoke to Professor Dumbledore about going to Diagon Alley to visit Gringotts. I didn't tell him what I wanted to go for. I just said that I wanted to look at Sirius's vault, and he agreed. Hermione told me that you had the day off from classes, so I thought I would ask if you wanted to come along."

"You spoke to Hermione?" she asked nervously, shooting him a quick glance as she finished gathering her books together. He didn't look like he knew, and he didn't appear to have noticed that the flow of banter between them had returned to the way it had been before. Perhaps Hermione hadn't told him after all. Ginny brightened a little as she stood up, enjoying the thought of spending the day with him. "Sure, if you don't mind me seeing the Black Family Vault."

Harry shrugged. "Safety in numbers. Bellatrix was a Black, so you never know what might be in there."

"On second thought, maybe I'll stay here."

"You sure?" He removed the cloak, bringing the rest of his body into full view, and began folding it up neatly. As he tucked it into his bag, he added, "Then you have fun with those essays."

She looked at the stack of books and parchment, then after Harry, who was climbing out the portrait hole, and made up her mind. "Hang on, wait for me!"

"Changed your mind, did you?" he asked innocently with a grin, slowing down so that she could fall into step beside him. Ginny stuck her tongue out at him and refused to speak to him the whole rest of the way down to the hall.

Much to their surprise, Nymphadora Tonks was the only one waiting for them. She was leaning against the wall beside the doors, her expression looking unusually pensive. For once, her hair was a surprisingly subdued shade of dark blonde that fell in waves down to her shoulders. Instead of the robes that would signify her as an Auror, she was wearing a simple violet robe over a plain black skirt and a white blouse. Paired with pale green eyes, her overall appearance made her look rather young. Her head rose as they approached, and a broad grin crossed her face when she caught sight of them. All signs of her bad mood vanished as she stepped forward.

"Wotcher, Harry, Ginny," she greeted brightly. "I heard that I'm escorting you to Diagon Alley? Sounds right fine by me. Kingsley's been in a state lately, and I welcome the chance to get away from the office. Are we going shopping?"

"We're going to Gringotts," said Harry quickly. "Err... Tonks..."

"I'll wait outside for you," Tonks told him, guessing what was on his mind. "You'll be alright going in there by yourself. Gringotts is one of the safest places in Britain. No dark wizard is going to be stupid enough to risk bringing the wrath of the goblins down on him by starting a fight in there."

"Thanks," he said, flashing her a smile.

"No problem. Come here, you two. I've got a portkey somewhere." Looking frazzled, Tonks patted her robes. She finally came up with the portkey, which looked like the wrapper from a piece of muggle candy. Harry and Ginny stepped closer to her and reached out to place a finger on the wrapper. Tonks whispered the activation word and the three of them vanished.

In spite of the rough ride, Ginny managed to land on her feet, but Harry stumbled when he came down and fell against her, sending them both to the ground. Tonks chuckled, making no move to hide her amusement as Harry turned a deep pink and scrambled off of Ginny. He looked so embarrassed that Ginny allowed him on a reprieve on being teased and instead looked up at the Gringotts Bank. It had been some time since she'd visited the enormous building, not since the last annual Weasley trip to Diagon Alley for school books and supplies. Just thinking about the trip was enough to make her happiness over the outing disappear. There was nothing in Gringotts for her now. She had no money to her name except for a handful of galleons, sickles, and knuts.

"Maybe I'll wait out here, too," she said suddenly. "With Tonks."

"No way," Harry said before Tonks could speak. "You said you were coming, so let's go." In a surprising show of boldness, he took her by the hand and forcefully pulled her up the steps. Too shocked to fight back, Ginny allowed him to yank her into the bank. Several goblins turned to stare at them, but none of them approached. Harry didn't appear to be daunted by the glares and marched across the room, dragging Ginny along behind him. As he stepped up to the counter, she slipped her hand free and moved off to the side, aware that she was blushing because of how hot her face felt.

Some part of her had wondered whether that part of the ritual had worked, and there was no doubt in her mind that she had her answer. The feel of having Harry's hand around hers had been a complete rush that still left her feeling a bit dizzy. She fanned herself and waited patiently as the goblin spoke to Harry for a moment before hopping off of its stool and gesturing for Harry to follow it. He glanced back at Ginny and she nodded, indicating that she was willing to wait while the necessary paperwork was filed. Harry nodded back and went into the room with the goblin.

Alone, Ginny drummed her fingers on the edge of the counter, conscious of the occasional glare from a goblin. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought that they somehow knew she didn't belong in a bank. She tried to ignore them and focused on watching a beautiful little girl who was clearly out on a shopping trip with her mum. A pang went through her as she watched the mother withdraw some money and walk out of the bank hand-in-hand with her

daughter. That was what she'd given up, in return for a boy who could make her heart turn over. Ginny sighed and looked back as the door opened and Harry came back out. He spotted her and grinned, prompting a small smile in return. For better or worse, she'd made her choice.

"That was fast," she greeted him as he approached.

"It was only the first part," he replied, surprising her when he grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand up. He pushed two things into the palm of her hand before letting go and watching her closely.

Ginny gave him a suspicious look before slowly opening her fingers. Her jaw dropped when she saw that there were two little keys in her hand, one inscribed with the number 687 and the other with the number 711. She glanced back up at him and tried to speak patiently. "Harry, what are you doing?"

"Hermione told me what you did," Harry said quietly, his green eyes trained on her face. "She explained what it meant. No one has... ever done anything like that for me, Ginny. I can't even begin to thank you." He straightened his glasses. "But this is a start. From now on, you officially have full access to everything that I own. What's mine is yours, including the property that I inherited from my parents and Sirius, as well as all of my gold. Those keys are for you, and if you come into the office, Griphook can perform the necessary paperwork so that you'll have legal access to everything and not just the vaults."

"Harry, I can't accept this," Ginny said, stunned. She tried to give the keys back to him and scowled when he refused. "Look, I appreciate that you want to thank me, but this is just way too much. You weren't my only reason for what I did. Besides, that's your legacy from Sirius and your parents. I couldn't possibly..."

"You can, and you will." He caught her hand and closed her fingers over the keys, preventing her from giving them back. "Please, Ginny. Regardless of whether I was your only reason, I was still a reason." A crooked smile crossed his face, and his eyes looked suspiciously damp. "You know that I've always felt guilty about having so much, but I never had anyone to really share it with. Between my parents and Sirius, they left me with enough gold that we could both spend a thousand galleons a day and there would still be a mountain left

over. So please, take it, alright? And I don't want you to feel bad about using the gold, either," he added. "I want you to know that it's yours just as much as it is mine."

As touched and relieved as she was, she couldn't quite stop the tears from filling her eyes. Harry looked quite alarmed when he noticed that she was nearly crying and she burst out laughing instead, brushing away the tears with her free hand. All of her money troubles were apparently over before she'd even had the chance to really think about them. A wave of affection flooded through her, and she found herself smiling shyly. She had loved Harry long before he'd proven what kind of man he could be, but now she cared for him even more.

"Thank you," she said softly, holding the keys so tightly that she could feel an imprint being pressed into her skin. "Thank you so much, Harry."

"I should be the one thanking you," he pointed out. "Even if you did ignore me and go through with it when you shouldn't have."

"Like I said, it wasn't just for your sake, though that was a large part of it," she told him. "I did it for me, too. It hurts, and I know that I've lost a lot, but I'm actually glad that I did it." She hesitated briefly. "I feel... more free, somehow."

Harry looked troubled, but he smiled anyway. "I'm glad. Come on, Griphook is waiting."

"Alright." Ginny followed him across the room and entered the small office, then closed the door behind them. Griphook was sitting behind a desk with his hands folded, waiting patiently. Offering him a tentative smile, Ginny sat down in one of the chairs and folded her hands in her lap. Harry sat beside her.

"This is her," he said to Griphook. "I want her name to be on all of the paperwork, so that she has as much access to everything as I do."

Griphook sorted through a few of the pages on the desk, making two stacks. "Does that include the Potter Family Vault as well as the Black Family Vault?" he inquired. "According to our records, you haven't visited or returned the paperwork for those vaults."

"There's a difference?" Harry said in surprise. "I knew I hadn't seen Sirius's vault, but I've definitely been to mine."

Raising an eyebrow, Griphook opened a slender black book. "You have four vaults total, Mr Potter. The two vaults that you've mentioned are your own personal vault, started for you in January of 1980." He flipped to a new page. "And the personal vault of one Sirius Orion Black. What you seem to be unaware of is that since you have reached the age of sixteen and received your magical inheritance, you are permitted to have access to the remainder of your family vaults as well as the Black Family Vault. We sent you that documentation on July 31st of this year. Did you not receive it?" His piercing gaze rested on Harry.

"No, I didn't," Harry said slowly, looking confused. "I was at the Dursley home. I didn't get any letters all summer." He cast a bewildered glance at Ginny, who could only shrug in response. But it didn't take the two of them long to come to the same conclusion. Ginny winced when Harry swore softly. "That bastard. He's been running interference with my mail!"

"Someone prevented you from getting your mail?" Griphook said sharply.

"I bet it was Dumbledore," raged Harry, not paying attention to Griphook at all.

"Albus Dumbledore?" the goblin said loudly. Harry stopped and glanced at him as Griphook continued, "According to my documentation, from the time that you were placed into a muggle home, Albus Dumbledore has been considered your magical guardian. That means that he has been the manager for your vaults, which allows him a certain amount of restricted access to gold and property. This includes the Black vaults that you became the owner of in late mid June. When we sent you the information about your family vaults, we included the papers for you to sign that would prevent your magical guardian from having entry to your vaults or property." His eyes narrowed. "Are you saying that your magical guardian deliberately kept those papers from you?"

Face like a storm cloud, Harry gritted his teeth. He couldn't openly accuse Dumbledore of having done that because he had no proof. "I

will say that I didn't see those papers, so I would like a copy right now," he said as calmly as he could. "I don't want anyone to be able to access my vaults or property or anything that I own except for me or Ginny."

"Very good, Mr Potter. One moment." Griphook closed the book, slipped off of his chair, and disappeared through a door at the back of the room.

"That bastard," Harry burst out immediately, springing to his feet. "How dare he keep those papers away from me. Did he ever plan to tell me that I have more vaults here?" He began pacing back and forth. "I bet this was all just a ploy to be able to keep using Grimmauld Place without my permission. What the fuck else has he been keeping from me? Why would he do this, Ginny?"

"I don't know," Ginny said honestly. She'd known that they weren't supposed to write to Harry that summer, and indeed, the few times she'd attempted to get a message to him anyway, he'd never responded. At least now she understood why. Dumbledore had probably enacted new wards around the Dursley home that prevented any mail from getting in. "Harry, maybe you should get a copy of everything that pertains to your vaults. It wouldn't hurt."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," he said, dropping back into the chair. His expression was a mixture of anger and hurt, and she felt a swell of pity for him as he mumbled, "I just can't believe this... every time someone tells me to trust Dumbledore, something like this happens, and I don't understand how I'm supposed to be able to trust him when he keeps pulling this kind of crap with me." He gave a groan of frustration and buried his head in hands.

Unfortunately, Ginny had no answer for him. Albus Dumbledore was a mystery to more than one person, and she didn't think anyone would ever understand the games that the man loved to play. She sat in silence until Griphook finally returned carrying a folder, from which he removed several sheets of parchment. He slid the sheets across the desk and placed a quill on top of them. Lifting his head, Harry signed them without saying a word, and as soon as his signature was written, the papers disappeared. Griphook smiled widely, looking pleased, as Harry ran his hands through his hair.

"Could I get a copy of all of the records for my vaults?" he asked, glancing at Ginny. "And is there a way to make sure that Albus Dumbledore can't make any more financial decisions for me at all?"

Griphook nodded. "Right now, Albus Dumbledore can no longer remove any money from your vault. The papers that you signed also mean that all wards to your properties have been re-set and keyed to you, so it will be necessary for you to allow new people to enter, as the only person who will be allowed in is you. However, being that Dumbledore will be your magical guardian until you turn seventeen years old, he can still request information pertaining to your files. If you desire, we can file the appropriate paperwork to make sure that no one here will speak to Albus Dumbledore in regards to your property or vaults. He will have no jurisdiction as far as the Potter and Black vaults."

"That's what I want," Harry said firmly. "But I have one more request. I want Ginny to have exactly the same amount of power that I do in regards to everything that we own, both money and property. Is that possible?"

"Harry!" Ginny exclaimed, shocked. "No! It's more than enough that you've given me keys to the vaults, and that you're sharing so much with me. You can't just – "

"Yes, I can," Harry interrupted. "Ginny, look. I don't have any other family. If something happens to me, I want to know that you could take care of everything. There is no way that I want Dumbledore to be able to get his hands on my vault or my property again. The only way to prevent that is to have the name of someone I trust be given equal status."

Put like that, Ginny didn't know how to argue, even though she still didn't feel right about it. She frowned and remained quiet as Griphook removed more parchment from his folder and began directing both of them to sign at different spots. Reluctantly, she picked up a quill and signed wherever Griphook wanted her to. The goblin cast her a doubtful look when he learned that she had no last name, but allowed her to sign as merely "Ginevra". Once the two of them had signed everything, those papers vanished as well. Next, Griphook took out another piece of parchment that was somewhat different. It was quite thick, with a distinctly greenish cast, and

covered with strange writing that Ginny didn't recognize. He placed it on the table and gestured to Harry.

"Hand," he said.

Raising an eyebrow, Harry extended his hand. Griphook carefully pricked the end of Harry's index finger with a small penknife and allowed a single drop of blood to fall on the parchment. Beside the drop of blood, Harry signed his name again in weird, bright green ink, and then, as per Griphook's instruction, took out his wand and tapped the parchment, leaving a bright gold spot. Blood, spot, and signature all glowed briefly before disappearing. Nodding in satisfaction, the goblin repeated the procedure with Ginny. She sucked on her wounded finger as Griphook carefully placed the green parchment inside of his folder and stood up. He walked over to a flat table in the corner of his office and placed the folder on top. The table lit up with an eerie yellow light, and when it disappeared, a second white folder had appeared next to the first.

"Your copy, Mr Potter," Griphook said, handing the white folder to Harry. "You and your partner now have the exact same status in regards to all four vaults and all property belongings to the Potter and Black families. Everything is in both your names."

"Thanks," Harry muttered, performing a quick shrinking charm. He tucked the folder safely into his pocket. "Out of curiosity, what were the blood and the spot from my wand for?"

"Sealing with blood and magical signature is a method of safety," Griphook informed him with a strange grin, heading over to a strange little box that was sitting atop a table behind him. "Particularly when one party possesses no last name. It helps to ensure that no one can pretend to be you. Our methods are extremely secure." He opened the top of the box and reached inside, then returned to the desk holding four more keys in his hand. Two he handed to Harry, and the other two went to Ginny, who examined them. Both were made out of a shiny black material. One was for Vault XI, and the other was Vault III.

"X-one?" Harry asked, looking blank.

"Roman numerals. It's the number eleven," said Ginny, carefully placing the four keys in the pocket of her skirt. "The family vaults must have a different numbering order than regular vaults do."

"Correct," said Griphook. "This concludes our business for the time being, Mr Potter, Miss Ginevra. If you would like, I can have a goblin take you down to visit your vaults."

"Yes please." Harry stood up and helped Ginny to her feet. She followed the two of them out of the office and over to the track, where Griphook spoke quietly to one of the goblins who was waiting to man a cart. Griphook nodded and gestured for the two of them to climb in. Once they were settled and holding on tightly, the goblin launched them down the track.

Please review!

A/N: Thanks so much for the reviews, everyone. I had a few concerns that I was heading down the road of Dumbledore bashing. I hope that this chapter will clear things up. Even though this story will feature a more independent Harry and Ginny, that doesn't necessarily mean I'm trying to bash anyone. It may seem that way at first, but that's because the story is primarily from their point of view, and neither one of them is all-seeing. Please enjoy!

The cart took them deep underground, much further than either of them had ever been before. Ginny smoothed her hair back and glanced around, fascinated by the sight of the occasional dragon. She'd always known that Gringotts was well protected, but knowing was a lot different than seeing. No wonder Tonks had felt comfortable with letting her and Harry come down by themselves; the lower depths of the bank was a virtual maze, with tunnels going left and right everywhere she looked. It would take a goblin's near perfect memory to be able to remember what tunnel led to which place. As though sensing her thoughts, the goblin at the front of their cart cast a smirk over his shoulder and reached out towards the lever that controlled the cart's speed. He twisted the lever violently, bringing the cart to a screeching halt that nearly took both Harry and Ginny off of their feet.

"Vault III, the Black Family Vault," the goblin announced, nimbly clambering out of the cart without waiting for them. He hurried over to the surprisingly small, black stone door, which stood about the same height and twice the width of a normal door. There was a golden circle in the middle of the door, and he pointed to it as he spoke. "Please put your hands here so that the vault can decide if it wishes to accept you or not."

"Hang on, we did the necessary paperwork upstairs," Harry said, helping Ginny out of the cart. "So what do you mean, if the vault wants to accept us?"

An ugly smile was his response. "Many of these pureblood vaults are so old and have been exposed to so much magic that they have become somewhat sentient," answered the goblin, sounding far too pleased for Harry's liking. "The contents are legally yours and Gringotts has allowed you access to them. That is the extent of our involvement. Whether or not the vault itself accepts you as a master will depend, but the only way to find out is to place your hand on that circle. In this case, Mr Potter, you requested that someone else be

your equal. That means both of you will have to do it, or the vault will not open."

Ginny was almost afraid to ask, but curiosity drove her to. "What happens if the vault decides not to accept us?"

"You will be sucked inside and the vault will do whatever it wants with you. Gringotts does not allow their goblins to intervene," he replied, smirking broadly. From the expression on his face, he was very much interested in having that outcome. "Now, if you please, the day is growing late."

"Come on, Ginny. It can't hurt us," Harry said. "Sirius left the contents to us." He stepped forward and placed a hand on the gold circle before Ginny had the chance to remind him that yes, the vault could hurt them. When nothing happened to him, he gave her an expectant look over his shoulder and she sighed, making a mental note to learn how to say no to those beautiful emerald green eyes as she reluctantly placed her hand next to his. For a moment, a silence fell over the three of them, broken only by a strange humming sound. She shivered violently, and suddenly realized that her hand was sealed to the wall, preventing her from breaking free no matter how hard she yanked – and pull she did, because a strange iciness was sliding up her hand and into her chest. Harry's sharp breath told her that he was experiencing the same bizarre feelings.

"What is this?" Ginny whispered, unable to keep herself from shivering again. She'd never experienced anything quite like it. A deep, profound cold... Like the whole world around them had turned to ice and snow, even though the goblin didn't look cold at all. Her knees buckled, and she would've fallen against the door had Harry's arm not shot out and grabbed her around the waist. He held her on her feet and glared at the door.

"We are the new masters of the Black family!" he shouted. "We demand that you allow us into our vault."

An eerie silence fell as the humming began to gradually desist. Ginny found the strength to fight off the urge to fall asleep as she reached up with her free hand, remembering the blood that the two of them had been forced to give in Griphook's office. Grimly, her fingers shaking with cold, she dug her sharp nails into Harry's wrist and tore until his blood began to seep down his wrist and the door.

Then she did the same to her own wrist. Her skin was so numb from the cold that she couldn't even feel it, even though it should have hurt a lot. That did it, though. The blood on the door turned a deep golden color, and all of a sudden, they were free. Harry practically leapt backwards, hauling Ginny with him, as the door vanished.

"You have been granted entrance," said the goblin, sounding almost disappointed. "You may enter and do as you wish."

Harry muttered something under his breath that sounded less than complimentary and hastened Ginny into the vault. The door reappeared as soon as they were inside, blocking them off from the goblin's view. It was blessedly warm inside the main part of the vault, and Ginny relished in the feeling as Harry gripped the bottom of his shirt in his teeth and pulled. She came back to herself in time to see him wrapping a long length of fabric around her wrist, covering up the bleeding scratches, which were beginning to ache fiercely. He did the same thing to his own wrist, grimacing as he attempted to tie the fabric.

"I'm sorry," Ginny said quietly, realizing that the nails of her left hand were covered in blood. Her stomach churned as she pulled out her wand and performed a quick cleaning charm. She wished that she knew some healing charms as she watched Harry struggle. "You've ruined your shirt."

"Sorry? We'd still be out there if you hadn't thought so quickly," Harry replied, cursing softly. Ginny tucked her wand away and leaned over, quickly tying the knot for him. "Thanks. I never even considered that the vault might need blood to accept us... Though considering what Sirius always told me about his family, that fits in more ways than one. I should be thanking you. I don't even want to think about what the vault would have done to us if you hadn't been here."

Smiling shyly, she stepped back. "You were the one who kept me standing. It was a team effort."

He grinned and turned to look at the vault, his expression becoming more serious as they surveyed the Black Family Vault for the first time. Unlike most of the personal vaults, it was not just one room. There was actually a corridor with a series of doors on either side, and it appeared to go on for quite some distance. Ginny glanced at

the first door, but there didn't seem to be any way of identifying what was actually inside. She found it hard to believe that the Blacks would have been patient enough to look through every room when they wanted a specific item, so there must have been some kind of an identification system. The question was, what kind of system was it and how were they supposed to activate it? She didn't realize she'd spoken out loud until Harry answered her.

"I think it's safe to assume that both of us have to be working together," he said thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. "When I requested that we have equal power, it looks like the vault took me at my word. I know I wouldn't have gotten in here if your blood hadn't been on the door as well. It might have been different if I'd been alone, but..." He looked over into the fathomless darkness and frowned pensively. Clearly he didn't like the idea of an endless search either. "Do you have any ideas?"

Ginny thought for a minute but came up blank. "I don't really know too much about these kinds of vaults," she admitted. "It's not like the Weasley family ever had a need for a vault like this. Ours was just like a personal vault. I guess we should have asked the goblins before we came down."

"I doubt they would have told us," Harry muttered. "Oh, well. Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

So said, he walked over to the first door on the left side and put his hand on the doorknob. It refused to turn until Ginny stepped forward and put her hand on the knob as well. Only then did it open, revealing a fairly deep room that was piled high with knuts. Ginny knelt down and picked up one of the little brass coins. It was hard to believe that a pureblood family like the Blacks would have a room filled with the most common form of wizarding money. The doubtful look on Harry's face told her he was thinking the same thing. She tossed the coin down and they left the room, moving on to the next one, which was so filled with sickles that they couldn't even take a step inside. The one after that was so crammed full of galleons that a small mountain actually spilled out onto their feet when they opened the door.

"This family was insane," Ginny said, shaking her head with amazement. She'd never seen so much money in her life. "I can't believe it."

"Neither can I. No wonder Sirius was never concerned about money." Harry took something from his pocket and knelt. He shook it out, revealing that he was holding one of the bags that Gringotts gave to their more important customers. No matter how much money was put into it, the bag would always remain as light as though it was completely empty. She watched as he scooped several thousand galleons inside of it, and then repeated the motion with a second bag. Finally, he handed both bags to her and began scooping up the leftover galleons and tossing them back into the room so that they could get the door shut. It took some work. "There's enough money here to support everyone in Hogwarts," he grunted, leaning on the door with all of his strength.

"I guess that's the point," she said slowly, attempting to give the bags back. He took one but refused to take the other. Ginny scowled at him and reluctantly folded the bag so that she could put it in her own pocket. She didn't feel right about taking Harry's money, but he was clearly not going to take no for an answer. "The Blacks really got off on being richer and better than everyone else, even if they never actually did anything with that money. It's part of what Sirius hated about them."

Harry glanced at her, surprised. "Did he tell you that?"

She nodded as she trailed him to the next room and helped him to open it. Surprisingly, it appeared to be empty. "Sometimes, late at night after everyone was sleeping, we used to sit in the kitchen and talk," she confessed, feeling a bit embarrassed. No one knew about that, not even Astoria or Hermione. "He used to tell me about the Marauders and what it was like growing up with Remus and your parents." A small smile crossed her lips, and she brushed a few strands of hair over her shoulder. "He used to talk about his family a lot and how much he hated them and what they stood for."

They had come to the next door and Ginny reached out and put her hand on the knob, expecting Harry to do the same. When he didn't, she turned and saw that he was staring at her with the oddest expression on his face. She blinked at him, confused when he failed to respond even when she called his name several times. It looked as though he was a hundred miles away. His eyes were unfocused, and he acted like he didn't even notice when she tapped him on the

shoulder. Finally, Ginny snapped her fingers in front of his face and jumped when he started.

"Are you alright? I've been calling your name."

"What? Oh, sorry," he said, looking away from her. He frowned and shook his head. "I was just thinking... I wish I'd gotten the chance to talk to Sirius like that. I feel like there were so many opportunities that I should have taken advantage of, and I didn't. Now I'll never have them again."

"Oh, Harry," Ginny said softly, feeling badly for him. "No one could have predicted something like this." Except that Sirius had. She had to look away. "It wasn't your fault."

"I know." Harry ran his hands through his hair, mussing the black curls even worse than usual. "But I can tell myself that until I'm blue in the face and I still won't believe it. No one is safe around me for long."

"Hey. I'm still here, you know," she said playfully, making an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Yeah, and in your first year you were possessed by a psychopath," Harry said, biting his lip. "I wonder why that happened?"

"That wasn't your fault. Hey!" She grabbed his arm when he made to turn away and forced him to look at her. Ginny looked straight into his eyes, willing him to understand and agree with what she was telling him. "Harry, listen to me. Nothing is your fault when it comes to Voldemort. It's not because of you, got it? Voldemort is a monster and that has nothing to do with you. What happened to me in my first year was horrible, but it's not like you handed me that book. Lucius Malfoy was quite capable of doing that on his own, and I was the one who chose to write in it. You had nothing to do with it, and don't ever let me hear you say that there is danger in being around you. That's not true."

Something flickered in his eyes, and he glanced away from her. His voice was low when he spoke. "That's nice of you to say, Gin, but you don't know the whole story. Sirius was targeted because he was my godfather - "

"Yeah, and also a well known defector from the Dark. Merlin, Harry, I would have been targeted because I was the daughter of a prominent light-minded wizard even if you hadn't been friends with Ron," she pointed out. "It had nothing to do with you, okay? I don't want you blaming yourself for anyone's deaths, Harry. That rests squarely on Voldemort's shoulders, not yours."

Even though he nodded silently, she got the feeling that he didn't necessarily believe her and was just going along with it, and that was frustrating. What else could she say to make Harry understand that he was just one fighter amongst many? That even though Voldemort had chosen to single him out, it still wasn't his fault? She sighed and helped him to open the fourth door, which proved to be a room filled with what looked like rolled up rugs. No sign of a pensieve, and Harry's previously cheerful demeanour had completely disappeared, making the search awkward and uncomfortable. He was sullen, though cooperative, and everything she said was received with either a brisk nod or a small, empty smile. Ginny felt like kicking him, if just to get more of a response than a blank stare, and as they kept going down the hall, she could feel herself getting more and more frustrated with both the vault and Harry.

"This is pointless," she declared finally, stopping. They'd opened up well over a dozen doors, and while every room was fascinating, none appeared to hold a pensieve. Worse yet, there was no end to the corridor in sight. From what she could see, they could be here for a full week opening doors and they might never get anywhere. She reluctantly put her hand on the next knob and sighed loudly. "I just wish we could find a pensieve!"

An electric jolt ran up both of their arms. Harry swore softly and Ginny gasped as the door swung inward to reveal a room that was completely empty except for a beautiful pensieve made out of some kind of white material. It was sitting in the middle of the room with a corked vial next to it. The two of them exchanged bewildered looks before they stepped into the room. He hefted the pensieve while she picked up the vial and examined it. There was some kind of slushy clear liquid inside, which she guessed was meant to go into the pensieve before memories were put in.

"Are you telling me that all we had to do to find this stupid thing was ask?" Harry said incredulously, rapping on the pensieve with a knuckle.

"I guess so," Ginny said, realizing that she had a headache. How much time had they wasted? "I guess the goblin wasn't joking when he said that this place has a mind of its own. Maybe we should have tried that from the beginning." She had meant for the comment to sound like a joke, but actually, she was just really annoyed. Bloody Blacks. Figured that they would have such a simple system but not bother to explain it!

Harry muttered something less than complimentary and stormed back towards the entrance. Ginny sighed, closed the door of the room, shoved the bottle into her pocket, and jogged after him. She didn't bother trying to speak to Harry or to the goblin as they emerged from within the vault and got back into the cart. As per Harry's curt request, the goblin took them back up to the surface instead of making a stop at the other three vaults. That was fine with Ginny; they'd gotten what they had come for, and quite frankly, although the experience had been enlightening in many ways, she felt completely worn out. It was a relief when they reached the surface and she spotted Tonks waiting for them by the entrance.

"I thought maybe you'd tried to slip me," Tonks said with a smile. Only the nervous twitch of her jaw indicated that she really had been worried about them, and no wonder. Ginny could tell by the position of the sun that she and Harry had been down in the vault for hours. They needed to get back to Hogwarts before curfew.

"Sorry. It took a lot longer than we thought it would," Harry replied, looking weary.

Tonks glanced at the two of them and seemed to think better of whatever she had been about to say. Silently, the three of them walked down the stairs of Gringotts and moved off to the side, where Tonks held out another portkey, this time created from a muggle soda can. Harry and Ginny touched a finger to it and, seconds later, were set down right in front of the front doors of Hogwarts. Much to their combined surprise, Kingsley Shacklebolt stood there waiting for them. The man glared at Tonks, who offered a sheepish smile and waved to Harry and Ginny as the two of them quickly slipped by Shacklebolt and into the castle. Their trip back to the Gryffindor

Tower was made without speaking, but just before they would have separated, she reached out and touched his arm. He looked at her, then down at her hand, before covering it briefly with his. That was enough. Both of them were smiling as they went up the stairs to their dorms.

NIR

The Hospital Wing at Hogwarts was not a very large place, but at that moment, it felt like it was over a mile wide. Hermione gritted her teeth as she very slowly eased herself into a sitting position and, for the first time in well over a week, placed both of her feet on the ground. One of her legs was fine, if a bit weak, but the other one... she winced as pain shot up her leg. Madame Pomfrey hovered behind her, clicking her tongue anxiously as Hermione took her first step. She hadn't been in bed long enough for her muscles to weaken too much, but the tendons and muscles in her ankle had been severely bruised when she'd fallen. The bone was finally healthy and whole, meaning that now attention could be focused on healing the rest. In the meantime... Hermione took another step and grimaced as most of her weight came down on a simple black cane that Pomfrey had given her.

"How are you feeling, Miss Granger?" the woman asked.

"I'm alright. It hurts a bit, but it also feels good," Hermione replied. She wasn't just saying that because she wanted to be out of bed, either. It felt wonderful to be in an upright position. As much as she loved books, she wasn't used to being so inactive, and it was taking a toll on her mental health. "I can feel the muscles in my ankle hurting, though."

Madame Pomfrey nodded, her eyes fixed to Hermione's foot. "I suspected that you might. The tendons and muscles were healing well until I vanished the bone and they collapsed in on each other. Then the growth of the bone would have forced them back into place, injuring them further." She crossed the wing and stood beside Hermione in case the girl needed additional help. "Fortunately, that kind of damage can be fixed with a special salve and a potion. Professor Snape should be bringing it by soon."

"I'll be glad to get out of here," she admitted as she turned, starting the short walk back to her bed. Her breathing was becoming heavier,

and she felt sweat beading up on her forehead. She leaned more heavily on the cane until she reached the bed and was able to sit down. Even with her weight off of her feet, her ankle continued to give little spasms of pain. "I never would have imagined that so much damage could come from just tripping over a rock."

"The smallest of things can cause big injuries," Pomfrey told her, chuckling. "You lay down, Miss Granger. I think you've had enough for the time being. I've seen how your ankle is healing and it's doing well, but I don't want you to cause more damage by walking around before you're ready."

"Yes, ma'am." Hermione shifted her weight until she was seated more fully on the bed. Satisfied, Madame Pomfrey bustled into her office and closed the door behind her, leaving Hermione alone. But she wasn't for very long. The Hospital Wing door opened and a rather sheepish looking Ronald Weasley stuck his head in.

"Can I come in, Hermione?" he asked quietly.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, glad that he'd had the sense to not just barge in. They hadn't really spoken since the whole disaster, and she hadn't seen him at all since his confrontation with Ginny, but they were still officially boyfriend and girlfriend. She inclined her head. "You may."

Ron pushed the door open further and entered the room. He held a bouquet of red roses in one arm and a wide, almost flat box in the other. Hermione took the bouquet somewhat reluctantly, hoping that her pleasure didn't show on her face. She was a complete sucker when it came to roses; the beautiful color and warm fragrance always reminded her of happy days spent in the garden with her father, and Ron knew it. No doubt he was hoping to use the flowers to get on her good side. With that thought in mind, she made an attempt to school her face into a more severe expression, though she very nearly lost it when she caught sight of what he had in the box: sugar quills, one of her guilty pleasures.

"Thanks," she said softly, placing the box on her nightstand. Ron had the ability to be such a sweetheart when he wanted to be. He knew things about her that no one else did, and she loved that about him.

"How are you feeling?" Ron asked, sounding awkward and more than a little guilty as he shifted his weight on the seat. "I thought that you'd be out of here by now."

"There's still a little damage to my ankle, but they're working on it, and I should be okay soon. But magic isn't a point and fix cure all the time," Hermione answered, realizing that she sounded more peeved than she'd wanted to only after Ron flinched. She made an effort to soften her voice. "Madame Pomfrey is concerned about the long term damage to the joint, tendons, and muscles. She doesn't want me to have pain in my ankle down the road, and that's what will happen if she's not careful to heal it properly the first time around."

He nodded like that made sense to him. "I hope you'll be able to come back soon. I miss you."

"Ron..." Hermione set the bouquet down on her lap and sighed. "I miss you too, but if you came here expecting me to choose between you and Harry, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. You're my boyfriend and Harry's my brother. I love you both. I can't pick one of you over the other."

"I know," he muttered, looking cross. He'd been expecting that reaction, but he'd hoped for a different one. "I just wish you could see him the way I see him, Hermione. He's a dangerous bastard and you can't trust him, but he has everyone convinced that he's an angel. I just feel so dirty when he's around me." Ron shuddered. "It's disgusting, like a black, oily slime I can't get rid of. And it worries me, that Harry has everyone so fooled. I can't stop thinking about what he could do to you when he's already convinced Ginny to go over to his side."

A chill ran down Hermione's spine, and she glanced away to hide her discomfort. On the one hand, Ron sounded so worried that she actually felt sorry for him. But on the other, she couldn't imagine a world where Harry acted anything like what Ron was describing. Harry wasn't like that at all, and he never had been. Fear and pity rose inside of her as she lightly stroked one vibrant red petal. She couldn't turn Ron away when he was only trying to look out for everyone, could she? As long as he promised not to try to make her pick a side, she could be friends with both of them, right? No matter

what horrible things that Ron had done, he was still Ron, and she still loved him.

"I understand. We're going to try to help you," she told him gently, giving him a warm smile.

"You still think something's wrong with me?" Ron said, looking upset.

She chose her words carefully, as she didn't want to make him even more angry. "I think that maybe you're not thinking clearly, and I'd like to make sure that no one is influencing your thoughts."

A frown crossed his face, and he shot her a suspicious look, like he wasn't quite sure whether her comment was meant to be an insult or not. "I'm fine, Hermione, and I really wish you'd drop this already. There's nothing wrong with me. I'm perfectly healthy. Just because I've had my eyes opened to a truth that I should've seen a long time ago doesn't mean I'm sick."

Hermione's heart twisted. "I know, Ron. Just... humour me, okay?"

He was silent for another few moments before nodding. "Okay." Hesitantly, he stood up and leaned forward, giving her plenty of time to jerk away. Hermione kept perfectly still and allowed the soft kiss, which was really nothing more than a fleeting brush of his lips before he straightened and backed away, seemingly understanding that she would allow no more than that. Ron graced her with one last smile before he turned and walked out of the Hospital Wing with so much as a goodbye, leaving her alone with a gorgeous bouquet of flowers and plenty to think about.

NIR

Headmaster Albus Dumbledore closed the door of his office gently and gave a motion of his hand, causing privacy wards to flash into place. He had just returned from one of the longest dinners that he could ever remember attending, during which he had eaten very little and suffered dearly from Minerva's accusing looks. She had been greatly against him sharing the news with the students, especially since she had been unable to find Ginny anywhere in the castle. Apparently Harry had invited her to go along with him to Diagon Alley. An unexpected move, but one that had worked in his favour.

The announcement had been made without either of the teens around, and now the whole school was buzzing with the news.

In spite of what Minerva and Severus believed, he hadn't enjoyed making that announcement. It would make Ginny's life a lot more difficult, but he felt it had to be done. The wizarding world's belief in Harry Potter was tentative at best, particularly with the inflammatory articles that Rita Skeeter had been producing on a daily basis. Dumbledore had been in contact with one of his private sources, a young wizard who had graduated the year before, and given him first hand information that put the best possible spin on the situation. No doubt the real story would be in tomorrow's edition of The Daily Prophet, giving people the opportunity to be swayed to Harry's side.

Winching as he settled down into his chair, he gazed down at the parchment on his desk and sighed, momentarily distracted from thoughts of Ginny. Just before supper, Gringotts had taken a certain amount of pleasure in informing him that he no longer had access to the Potter or Black vaults or property. He and all the members of the Order of the Phoenix would require Harry's permission to get inside of Grimmauld Place, and what's more, the fidelius charm that had been protecting the property had officially been dispersed in lieu of the fact that he did not have the current master's authorization to cast it. A heavy weight settled over Dumbledore's shoulders as he folded the parchment and placed it inside of a warded drawer. It had not been unexpected, but Harry's distrust in him – no doubt made worse by the discovery at Gringotts – still hurt.

He could have made an attempt to explain. The wards surrounding the Dursley household had been designed to protect Harry, as he would not have put it past an enterprising Death Eater to attach a locator charm or worse, a portkey, to a piece of mail. But that would bring up the question of why he had not given Harry what little mail he'd received that summer, and the answer was that Dumbledore had forced himself to be strong. Looking into Harry's angry green eyes and remembering that it was all because of his own actions was hard and painful, especially when he knew what was coming. His plans were not always easy, but he knew that this was right.

The facts were simple. Sirius Black's death had nearly killed Harry Potter. Albus Dumbledore did not expect to survive the second war. He was old, and he was well aware of the fact that his time was coming to an end. Voldemort was a worthy adversary, and the

difference in age and energy between the two of them would, at some point, be too great to overcome. Harry needed to be strong; all of his power and strength would be required to bring Voldemort down for good. Another death, particularly of someone he cared deeply about, could shatter him irreparably. It was much better for Dumbledore to soften the blow by driving wedges between he and the boy he loved as a grandson, than to allow Harry to suffer the pain of another death that he believed to be on his hands. The separation from Dumbledore, plus the fact that Sirius was actually alive, would be enough to give Harry what he needed.

It was for the greater good, for Harry. He just hoped he could remember that when it came time to face those accusing, emerald green eyes.

Please review!

A/N: Thank you all for the much appreciated reviews. They really encourage me to write more! I've had this posted on my profile for a while, but I'll re-post it here. This week marks the beginning of National Novel Writing Month, which means that there is a chance my updates may temporarily become sporadic. I'm going to try to keep working on my fanfiction on the side, and barring any unforeseen circumstances I should be able to do that, but if I miss an update you all know what happened. Having said that, I hope that this chapter doesn't become confusing to anyone. I tried to make it as clear as possible. Enjoy the story!

Important Note: The last part of this chapter is based off of Luna's description of the events that occurred in the Space Room. I tried to match it up as closely as possible, but she didn't give a lot of detail. In addition, I know that my personal description of how a pensieve works is likely not right... but I'm claiming artistic license.

Memoria Amotio = Memory Removal

BOY-WHO-LIVED LEADING OTHERS TO DARKNESS?

By Rita Skeeter

Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, is supposedly the paragon of good when it comes to our society. But is he really? His record is less than stellar, and even though Mr Potter was ultimately proven to be correct about the return of You-Know-Who, the Prophet has heard from many sources who wish to report that Potter's grasp on reality is tenuous at best. Not only is he a Parselmouth (a trait that is well known for being evil), he is also now being rejected by prominent light families. For those readers who have yet to be informed, the familial bonds between the Potters and the Weasleys, who are well known supporters for the light, were recently severed by one Ronald Weasley.

Potter and Weasley have fought before, most noticeably during the Triwizard Tournament, but were reportedly close friends until this year, when they began arguing more heatedly than ever. "You would just see them going at it all the time," says Michael Corner, a seventh year Ravenclaw student. "It got so that you could hardly turn a corner without finding the two of them at each other's throats. Weasley would tell anyone who listened that Potter's gone dark. And he knows Potter best, doesn't he? You have to wonder if maybe it's actually true and Weasley has just gotten tired of covering for him."

Many students of Hogwarts Academy have grown wary around Potter, who is reported to have a volatile temper. One inside source who wishes to remain anonymous reports that Potter is frequently in detention for talking back to professors and picking fights with other students. She adds that Potter "has an inflated ego, and he honestly believes that he can get away with anything and not get into trouble for it. There's no use trying to argue with him because he knows that he's got everyone wrapped around his wand."

But this is all news that we have kept you informed of as we become aware of it, so what brings this story to the front page? Well, we have a very interesting piece of news that needs to be shared immediately. This reporter is certain that all readers recall the trouble that occurred at Hogwarts four years ago, when a fearsome, evil basilisk was unleashed on the castle and many students were petrified. Although Headmaster Albus Dumbledore did his best to keep the real story a secret, sources at the school have reported that young Ginevra Weasley was at the middle of the problem, culminating in her disappearance, which Potter just so happened to save her from. Efforts to interview Ginevra have always been rebuffed by her parents, but this reporter is forced to believe that the fact that Dumbledore has kept the truth from the public is a red flag. If Ginevra was not the cause of the basilisk, why not tell the honest truth? What does Dumbledore have to hide?

Could it be, dear readers, that Ginevra has already gone dark? Only a dark witch or wizard would willingly consort with a basilisk. An informant close to her tells the Prophet that Ginevra has always carried a torch for Potter, and that it would be easy for Potter to sway her away from the light. This fits in with the news that the staff of the Prophet received last night. Ginevra disowned herself from the Weasley family in support of Potter.

Yes, readers, you read that correctly. What sort of light oriented young witch would willingly disown herself just to be with a boy who may already be dark? Did she seduce Potter to the dark side, or perhaps it was the other way around? It is impossible to know. Pictured left, you can see that Ginevra and Potter have already begun planning against the general public. Merlin knows what Potter collected from Gringotts, but we can only hope that it is nothing with which to terrorize us further. The Weasley family should count

themselves fortunate that this bad egg willingly detached herself from their ranks.

Ginny stared down at the copy of The Daily Prophet that had just been handed to her by one of her dorm mates, unsure of whether she wanted to laugh or cry at the absurd headline and accompanying story that Rita Skeeter had come up with. The outrageous article was complete with a black and white photo of her and Harry leaving Gringotts, walking close enough together so that it almost appeared as though the two of them were holding hands. Harry was carrying the pensieve under his arm, though from the angle that the photo had been taken, no one could tell what he was holding. Tonks was nowhere to be seen, perhaps having been edited out so that Skeeter could get the picture she wanted.

Was there anyone who could make a wilder story than Rita Skeeter? How had she even found out about Harry's and Ginny's visit to Gringotts the day before? And how dare she bring up the Chamber of Secrets, and insinuate that both she and Harry were dark? Nothing could be further from the truth, but it wasn't like the wizarding public would know that. Ginny had never really been slandered before in a newspaper article – Dumbledore's intervention in her first year had stopped Skeeter from writing anything too outrageous – and she didn't like her. Her cheeks were pink with outrage when she slammed the paper down on the table and fought back the urge to cast a good old-fashioned Incendio. All that would accomplish was drawing extra attention to herself, and enough students were staring at her already.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," said one of her dorm mates, casting her an uncertain glance. "You know, when Dumbledore made the announcement last night about you disowning yourself, I could hardly believe it."

"He what?" Ginny's eyes went with astonishment. She shifted uncomfortably, regretting her outburst when even more eyes turned her way. It was like they were expecting her to jump up and start casting the killing curse left and right. She made an attempt to swallow her rage as she leaned forward and glanced down the table to see how Harry was coping. He had a deep scowl on his face as he spoke heatedly to Neville, Seamus, and Dean, probably explaining that the article was a complete lie. Had he found out that Dumbledore had apparently outed them last night? No wonder Rita

had come out with the article. A dozen seats further down from Harry, Ron was reading the article with a great big smirk on his face, leaving no doubt in Ginny's mind as to just who the anonymous source was in Rita's article.

"Bastard," she said softly, wishing that she could hex her brother. Her eyes connected with Astoria's, and the sympathy that she saw there helped to soothe the sting a little. She really hadn't wanted the news of her disowning to spread through the wizarding world so quickly, and she hadn't told anyone for that reason. Only a select few, including her friends, had known about it. Obviously she should have known better than to trust the information to Dumbledore, who had chosen to out her to the school and the wizarding world. Twisting, she cast a severe glare in the direction of the head table.

Severus Snape met her gaze without flinching or glancing away. His deep, dark eyes held neither sympathy nor condemnation, and there was a suspicious looking burn mark on the table in front of the man that indicated he might have given in to the very urge she was suppressing. She flicked her eyes away from him and moved on to Professor McGonagall, who was holding a copy of The Daily Prophet and outright glowering at Dumbledore, who was frowning down at the paper. The man didn't look very happy, which meant that something had not gone according to plan, and now he was getting yelled at for it. There were few things that could cause Minerva McGonagall to lose composure and scold the headmaster in public, and the health and safety of her lions was one of them.

Before she had the chance to really contemplate what might have gone wrong, the man glanced up. Blue eyes connected with golden brown, and Ginny rocked backwards as an intense pain surged into her head, sliding across her temples. Immediately, she slammed her mental shields up, throwing Dumbledore out so hard that the headmaster jerked back as though he'd been slapped. Professor Snape glanced back and forth between the two of them and began to rise as Dumbledore's eyes narrowed and he caught her gaze again. His magic slammed against her shields, aiming to break them down by overwhelming her. Ginny struggled, but it was an intense battle; even for all of her practice, she was not quite at the level where she could defend against a full out attack from someone with that kind of power. What was he looking for? Evidence to prove that she was dark?

A second before her shields would have broken completely, a body slid in between her and Dumbledore, physically breaking the spell. She came back to herself with a start and tried to gasp quietly as an ugly headache formed at the base of her neck, realizing that Harry had stepped in front of her and Snape had distracted the headmaster, snapping the spell from both ends. Hands gripped her arms and pulled her out of her seat, half carrying her out of the room and away from the gossiping students. Ginny regained the ability to walk a moment later, though she was still grateful for Harry's and Astoria's help as the two of them led her outside and down the hill. They sat her down on one of the benches around the lake, and she caught Harry flashing Astoria a suspicious look as he handed Ginny a small bar of Honeydukes best chocolate. With hands that shook, she unwrapped it and popped half into her mouth. The intense sweetness helped to break the pain and anger lashing through her head.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked, his face a mask of concern. "I saw what he was doing. Does your head hurt? Do you need a headache potion? I can run to the Hospital Wing..."

"I'm okay," Ginny said, her face still pale. It was a good thing she didn't have classes that day. "Bloody Dumbledore. One of my dorm mates told me that he announced the disowning to the whole fucking castle last night."

"He what?" Harry's mouth dropped open and he sat down beside her.

"I wanted to tell you about it, but I didn't get the chance," said Astoria quietly. "You came to breakfast late this morning. He made the announcement at dinner last night. I suspect that he was trying to spin the news in a way that wouldn't come back to bite him in the ass. Judging by the newspaper this morning, that plan failed."

Harry shook his head slowly, green eyes flashing in silence as he and Ginny exchanged looks, both thinking the same thing. Just what was going on with Dumbledore? "I can't believe he did that," he muttered, upset. "I never thought that Dumbledore would do something like that. He knew that you wanted to keep it a secret for as long as possible. And then he tried to use fucking Legilimency on you? I'm pretty sure that's illegal." He dropped his head into his

hands. "I swear, I'm beginning to really think the man's lost it. I hope he didn't get anything private from you, Ginny."

"He didn't get anything," she replied with a certain amount of satisfaction.

"You mean he didn't get through?" Harry looked surprised.

"My shields aren't quite up to that level, but they're not that bad," she said, a little miffed at the implication. She finished the last of the chocolate and sighed with relief as Astoria began to gently massage the nape of her neck, soothing away the pain.

"I just didn't know you knew Occlumency," he said slowly, glancing at her with more respect. Clearly the news had distracted him from Dumbledore's latest betrayal. "Snape tried to teach me so that I could learn to keep Voldemort out, but he's a crap teacher. Who taught you?"

"No one. I taught myself. I wanted to learn after my first year," she replied quietly. "Mum and Dad thought that the best way for me to get over the Chamber of Secrets was to completely ignore what happened. But I started doing research into possession, and most of the books I found suggested that Occlumency was one of the best methods for preventing it. I didn't want anyone to be able to possess me like Tom Riddle did." It had been one of the things that she and Astoria had begun learning together in their second year, starting with more simple tasks, like meditation, and then slowly working their way up.

Harry frowned slightly and cast a curious glance between the two of them. "I didn't realize you two were friends."

"No offence, Potter, but you're not exactly the kind of person who keeps tabs on anything that's not right in front of you," said Astoria, rolling her eyes. She looked at Ginny. "Are your shields okay? Need help?"

Ginny considered the offer and then nodded as she held her hand up. "Hang on a moment, would you, Harry?" she asked as Astoria intertwined their fingers together and looked deeply into Ginny's eyes. The connection between them sprang up instantly the second their eyes met. It needed no encouragement, for it was a well

traveled path, and Ginny welcomed the soothing brush of Astoria's magic against her mental shields. There was no need for them to venture further into her mindscape, as Dumbledore hadn't had the time to broach more than the first couple of layers, and the repair was not a difficult or time consuming one to make. She blinked, breaking the link, to find Harry staring at the two of them with outright fascination.

"Could you teach me how to do that?" he asked immediately.

"It's usually better if you have an actual teacher," Ginny said hesitantly. She could remember many hours spent with a painful headache that potions did nothing to help because she and Astoria had overdone it, and she didn't wish that on Harry. "It took us a long time to learn, and we're still not Masters even now."

"You've got to be better than Snape was," Harry said wryly. "All he would do is use Legilimency to attack me after telling me to clear my mind."

Astoria frowned, her violet eyes flashing. "That is not how you teach Occlumency," she said, looking angry. Like most Slytherins, she usually liked how Professor Snape treated the Gryffindors. But Ginny's affection for Harry Potter had always made him off limits, and even she could tell that Occlumency was a magic that Harry desperately needed to learn. When it came to the safety of the wizarding world, she knew that hatred and old grudges should not have a place. "If you really want to learn, Potter, I can lend you books that will help more than the ones you would find in the library."

"Thanks," he said shyly, clearly surprised by the offer. "I'd appreciate that."

"Well, if that's the case, I guess I could try to help," said Ginny doubtfully. "But it will take a while."

"I have lots of time. I was thinking about asking Dumbledore if he would be willing to teach me since he's no longer avoiding me," said Harry. "But after the way he's been acting, I don't trust him. I don't feel like going to classes today, so I could help you back to the Tower if you want?"

"Let's go to the Room of Requirement," she suggested, standing up. "I'd rather not talk to anyone right now. I know my dorm mates will be dying to ask me questions about the disowning, and I don't feel like discussing it." The world threatened to tilt and she staggered. Harry grabbed her arm and steadied her before she could fall.

"Are you okay?" Astoria asked.

"I'm fine. You go ahead," Ginny said, flashing her a smile. Astoria nodded back to her before she turned and headed back up to the castle. Ginny watched her, feeling warm all over. She knew that she was fortunate to have a partner like Astoria, who was willing to stand beside her even though it would garner questions from people like Draco Malfoy and Daphne Greengrass. No doubt Astoria would have a lot to answer to by the time she got back to her dorms that evening, but that hadn't stopped the other girl from helping Ginny out of the Great Hall.

"She seems like a good friend to you," Harry observed, wrapping an arm around Ginny's shoulders and helping her to walk. The two of them began making their way up to the castle at a slower pace than Astoria, since they weren't concerned about classes. "I'm surprised that you're friends with a Slytherin."

"Tori has been good to me," she replied hesitantly. "Not all Slytherins are bad, Harry."

He shot her a half smile. "Yeah, I know. Just like not all Gryffindors are good."

That comment was enough to cast a silence over the two of them as they made their way up the seventh floor. The occasional student that spotted them stopped short and stared openly until Harry glared back, which generally sent them running in the opposite direction. Hiding her smile, Ginny realized that she felt well enough to pull away from him by the time they reached the seventh floor. She leaned against the opposite wall as Harry paced back and forth in front of the wall with a serious look on his face. The door appeared and, much to Ginny's surprise, opened from the inside to reveal Hermione waiting for them.

"Hermione! You were released from the hospital!" Ginny exclaimed, moving in to hug the older girl. Hermione smiled and returned the embrace quickly before ushering the two of them into the room.

"Madame Pomfrey let me go about half an hour ago," she said happily, closing the door behind them. "I just have to take it easy for a day or two. She recommended that I take today off so that I wouldn't have to walk all over the castle, and she said that tomorrow she'll write me a pass so that if I'm a little late to each class, it's not the end of the world. I'll even be able to go to Hogsmeade on Saturday if I want to." She beamed.

"That's awesome," said Ginny, smiling. "It's good to see you up and around. I was starting to think that you were going to be down there forever. And you!" Turning, she glared at Harry. "You knew she'd been released and you didn't tell me!"

Harry laughed. "I was trying to surprise you," he said with his best innocent look. "I thought you could use a bit of cheer after this morning." He took a small package from his pocket and placed it on the table.

"What happened this morning?" asked Hermione with a frown.

Harry scowled. "We found out that Dumbledore told the whole school about Ginny disowning herself," he said, his voice shaking with anger. "And not only that, the Prophet had a huge, slanderous article about it, so now it's safe to assume that everyone in the wizarding world knows."

"Merlin, Ginny, I'm sorry," Hermione said, her face pale. She had picked up a book but held it loosely as she looked between them. "That's awful. Why would Professor Dumbledore do something like that?"

"Good question," he muttered grimly. A quick wave of his wand returned the package on the table to normal size. As the bindings fell away, Ginny recognized the pensieve that they had taken from the Black Family Vault, along with the vial.

"I thought you wanted to learn Occlumency?" she asked, confused and grateful for a change of subject.

"You know Occlumency?" Hermione exclaimed.

At the same time, Harry said, "I figured that you would be too tired after what Dumbledore did to you. I know that a few sessions with Snape always did me in, and Dumbledore's got to be more powerful. Besides, I had already planned to meet Hermione here with the pensieve so that we could look at the battle together."

"Wait, wait, what happened to Ginny? What else did Dumbledore do?" Hermione interrupted, holding her hands out. She looked distressed as the realization that one of her favourite authority figures had been acting so unscrupulously. "And just when did you learn Occlumency?"

She let Harry explain what little they knew about the situation while she glanced around the room. Hermione had conjured up a large but cozy sitting room with two plush couches decorated in lively tones of red, gold, and white, clustered around a dark wooden table. There was a large fireplace on the far wall, and best of all, no one would be able to interrupt them. Ginny sat down on one of the couches and rested against the back as Harry concluded. A thoughtful look crossed Hermione's face as she contemplated what she had been told.

"I wonder what he was trying to find?" she said slowly. "Did you do or say something to him, Ginny?"

"Not that I'm aware of. I've been barely spoken to him during the last few days," Ginny replied. She rubbed her head. "The only thing I could think of was that maybe he really does suspect that I'm dark, but that's stupid. Just because I disowned myself doesn't mean I've switched sides."

"Maybe he thinks that Harry told you something," Hermione suggested. "Or he found out more details about your trip to Gringotts than we realized." There was a sly smile playing about her lips that indicated that she had heard every detail, and Ginny found herself blushing for some reason she couldn't identify. "No doubt Gringotts has already told him that he's no longer got access to the vaults, but they might have also told him that you do, Ginny."

"It's none of his business why Ginny has access," Harry snapped, picking up the vial. Talking about Dumbledore's actions seemed to

make him edgy and uncomfortable. "Come on, Hermione, let's begin."

"Alright, Harry." She flashed Ginny a look that said they would finish their discussion later and sat down beside Harry, across from Ginny. Placing the book she'd been holding on the table, she opened it. "It says here that to use a pensieve, you place the Memory Potion inside and then add your memories to it. Now, you can just add your memories to a pensieve without a potion, which is what most people do, but the use of a Memory Potion makes the transitions smoother and gives you more versatility when it comes to controlling the memory. It also requires less power and energy from the caster." Her eyes rose. "Normally they're quite expensive so we wouldn't worry about it, but since you guys found one in the vault, I think we should use it."

"That makes sense. What do I do with it?" he asked, popping the cork.

Hermione frowned down at the page. "Pour it into the pensieve," she said, flipping to the next page. "Then need to think of the memory you want to put into the pensieve. I'll put my wand to your temple, say the incantation, and your memory will be pulled right out of your mind. There are two different incantations we can use." She looked up at them. "One will remove the memory from your mind entirely and is more risky. The other creates a copy, but it takes longer and the quality won't be as good, so we might miss details."

"Use the first one," Harry said immediately. "We might only get one chance at this, Hermione. I don't want to mess it up." He glanced at Ginny. "Are you okay with that? There was a time when Neville, Hermione and I were separated from you and Ron and Luna. Ron was acting a bit funny when we found him again and Luna told us that he'd been cursed. Maybe this whole situation is because of whatever they hit him with..."

"That's fine with me," Ginny replied, smiling at him. The battle at the Department of Mysteries was mostly a blur to her, but now that Harry had mentioned it, she did remember being separated from the others while the Death Eaters were chasing them. "You can put the memories from more than one person in at a time?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Hermione said doubtfully. "Alright, Ginny, we'll do you first, and then we'll look at Harry's memories if we have to. Alright, Harry, go ahead, then." The two of them watched as Harry upended the vial. A clear, filmy liquid that looked something like water flowed out into the pensieve, filling it halfway. Ginny leaned over and looked into it doubtfully.

"Are you sure that's right? Isn't it supposed to be silver?"

"It changes colors when you add the memory. Ginny, think of that night, okay?" Rolling up her sleeves, Hermione took out her wand, checked the book one last time, and then placed the tip against her temple. Ginny closed her eyes and frowned in concentration for a moment before giving a tense nod. "Memoria Amotio!"

At the same time as she spoke, Hermione smoothly pulled the wand away from Ginny's temple. Dancing tendrils of wispy silver magic followed her wand as she lowered it into the pensieve. The memories were sucked into the liquid when her wand was about a foot away, causing it to turn a beautiful silvery color. All three of them bent over the pensieve and exchanged hesitant glances. Then Harry squared his shoulders and leaned down far enough to touch his face to the liquid. He was sucked in immediately. Hermione followed, and then Ginny, until the room was empty except for the fire and a bowl of churning liquid that had turned a vivid shade of red.

NIR

Ginny had the distinct impression of falling, even though she knew that she wasn't. Feeling dizzy, she opened her eyes when it stopped, and felt a chill go down her spine when she saw that they were standing in the Space Room of the Department of Mysteries. Her past self, Ron, and Luna were huddled against the closed door. Ron was swearing loudly under his breath. Hermione made an odd, horizontal movement with her wand that froze the memory, giving her and Harry the chance to look around. The room was a fathomless dark space that seemed to stretch on for infinity. Spaced apart on a smaller but still accurate scale were the nine planets, including a small moon that was orbiting around the Earth.

"Fascinating," Hermione breathed, looking truly impressed as she turned in a circle. The lack of gravity didn't seem to affect the three of them this time around, a fact that Ginny was grateful for. "You can

tell how much work has been put into it. The Unspeakables must have been working on this place for months."

"Yeah, it's great," Harry said impatiently. "You mind, Hermione? Let's get on with it."

Hermione shot him a look but chose not to comment. Instead, she flipped her wand, causing the memory to re-start. The door burst open right away, revealing four masked Death Eaters. Ginny watched with a critical eye as a short battle ensued, before Ron accidentally wandered too close to the end of the platform and ended up rising off into space. His startled cry as his feet left the ground made Harry snicker. Luna and past Ginny quickly followed him, but the Death Eaters were right behind them. All seven of them were still firing spells, but a lack of gravity appeared to have an effect on spells and curses as well. Many of them were going off course for no reason at all. Ron just barely managed to stupefy one of the Death Eaters, but a second one turned and caught him with a bolt of orange light.

"Hmm, orange light," Hermione murmured over the sound of past Ginny and Luna screaming for Ron. "I've heard of a few spells that show up with that color, but nothing that would do whatever it is happened to Ron..."

A funny look came over Ron's face, and he began to giggle and play with his wand, creating a bunch of little bubbles that amused him to no end. Past Ginny stared at her brother and then she and Luna began casting a volley of curses at the Death Eaters. The one who had cursed Ron made a desperate grab for past Ginny and managed to get a hold of her ankle. He clung desperately even though past Ginny tried her best to shake him off. By that point, the group was floating past Pluto. Luna scowled deeply and twisted, pointing her wand at the planet. She used the Reductor curse and blew the planet up before swiftly casting a shield charm to protect her and Ginny. One of the pieces struck the Death Eater in the face, and past Ginny cried out as his hand was forcibly wrenched off of her ankle. The sickening crack that resulted was enough to make everyone, even Harry, Hermione and present Ginny, flinch.

"That didn't sound pleasant," said Harry.

"It wasn't," Ginny replied, grimacing. Her own ankle was aching a bit in sympathy, even though Madame Pomfrey had successfully healed the damage done in a couple of days.

Luna hooked her arm around past Ginny's waist and began trying to get them back to the path by using her wand to create a small burst of wind that pushed them in the direction of the door. The other two Death Eaters were floundering, giving them a chance to escape. Ron, unfortunately, didn't seem to be in agreement with that plan. His face was chalk white and a thin ribbon of blood had dribbled down his cheek, and he giggled inanely when Luna attempted to coax him into following them back to the path. He seemed to have a great deal of fun exaggeratedly kicking his arms and legs in a swimming motion as Luna hauled him to safety.

Harry, Hermione, and Ginny found themselves physically pulled along as the past three dashed out of the room and met up with past Harry, Neville, and past Hermione. Present Hermione was taking close notes as the group of four (past Ginny wasn't much interested in speaking, and past Hermione was unconscious) chattered anxiously to each other. Ron continued to act strangely, grabbing onto past Harry's robes and nearly dragging the black-haired boy to the ground with him. Suddenly, Death Eaters burst into the room, causing their past selves to flee into the nearest room, which turned out to be the Brain Room. While past Harry, Luna and Neville were trying to deal with the danger, Ron turned and cast the summoning charm on the tank of brains.

Ginny's jaw dropped as one of the brains impacted Ron, wondering how she could have forgotten his foolish actions. Her brother began screaming and writhing, trying to get free. Past Ginny was knocked unconscious as past Harry tried to help, but the Death Eaters were fast approaching, and there were too many of them to fight. Hermione froze the memory for a second time just as past Harry made a run for it with Bellatrix Lestrange on his heels. She stepped over to the inert form of Ron and bent over him, examining him quickly and trying not to pay attention to the look of agony that was on his face. When she glanced up at Harry and Ginny, her eyes were glittering with excitement.

"I think this is it," she said. "It's a combination of that curse he was struck with and this... this brain. I bet the curse lowered his body's

natural defences, allowing either the curse itself or the brain itself to do something to him."

"Ew," Ginny mumbled. She didn't know whether to be grossed out or pissed. That brain could have hit any one of them, including Harry, and then they all would have been completely screwed. It wasn't completely Ron's fault, considering that he'd been hit by some weird spell, but still. "Do you know whose brain it was?"

Frowning pensively, Hermione turned and looked at the tank. It had shattered with Ron's spell, and the liquid had been soaking into the floor while the brains flopped about, looking suspiciously harmless. The plaque in front of the tank, however, was still intact. She tried to walk over towards the tank, but the memory grew fuzzier and filmier the further away she got from the group. By the time she was standing in front of it, she could barely make out the brains, much less any writing that might have been on the plaque. At last she was forced to give up and shook her head.

"Pensieves work by showing you a third person objective to what you saw. The magic builds a world based on what you've seen but might not have consciously noticed," she said, looking disappointed. "Ginny, you never got close enough to read what it said on the tank. From what I saw, none of us did."

Harry frowned. "So all we have to do is find out what spell was used and whose brain hit Ron, and we have a place to start from?" he asked, sounding less than enthused.

She sighed. "That about sums it up."

"On the plus side, I think we're a step ahead of the professors," Ginny volunteered. "None of them know exactly what we do. We didn't give them pensieve memories of the event."

"I wish that filled me with more cheer," Hermione muttered, giving a snap of her wand. That disorienting feeling began again, except this time it was of rising instead of falling. As the three of them were expelled from the pensieve and back into the Room of Requirement, she added, "Ginny, could I keep your memory for a bit? I'd like to do a more intensive study of that Death Eater's wand movement when he cursed Ron. He cast it wordlessly, so that's all we've got to go on."

I'm hoping that if I watch it again, I might remember a little more about it."

"Sure, Hermione, keep it as long as you like. I have no interest in putting that back into my head anytime soon," Ginny replied. Right now, there was a noticeable gap where her memory of those events should be. It was kind of nice. She could see why wizards used a pensieve to deal with bad memories. "If you need our help, just let us know."

Looking distracted, Hermione nodded absently, clearly already miles away. Harry and Ginny exchanged grins, knowing that it was likely Hermione wouldn't bother to ask unless she absolutely had to. She had a very specific system when it came to research, and after six years of perfecting said system and having little confidence in the research abilities of Harry and Ron, she had the tendency to live by the saying, 'if you want something done right, do it yourself'. For that reason, the two of them quietly left the Room of Requirement after a huge stack of books appeared beside Hermione and she began to flip through them, mumbling to herself under her breath. Hermione didn't even notice that they were leaving.

Please review!

A/N: Thanks so much for the reviews! I did have one complaint, which is that this story handles Occlumency differently from how it was described in the books. I haven't decided yet whether I'm leaving it up to Artistic License or whether I'll try to come up with some explanation for it... but in the meantime, I'm sorry if it bothers anyone. You'll notice some things in the story are definitely AU, including a new branch of magic I introduce at the end of this chapter that obviously wasn't in the books. I don't mind hearing complaints and I'm always appreciative of (constructive) criticism, but some things just can't be changed as per the nature of the story. So sometimes you'll just have to deal with it or stop reading. Having said that, I hope you enjoy.

In spite of her best efforts, Ginny found herself being ushered down to the Great Hall the next morning by her dorm mates under order of Hermione Granger. Surprisingly, the fact that she had disowned herself hadn't seemed to bother any of her classmates for the most part (excluding a few pureblood enthusiasts), but Rita Skeeter's mention of the Chamber of Secrets and Ginny's possible involvement had set the rumour mill flying all over again. She was right back to where she had been four years ago, with students staring at her fearfully when she walked past and backing away nervously if she made an attempt to approach. It was both frustrating and annoying, because in this case, she wasn't entirely sure that the truth was better than the rumours.

The thought made her sigh, and Harper Vance, who had been placidly walking beside her up to that point, practically leapt backwards at the sound. Ginny rolled her eyes, straightened her jumper, and sailed past the small, anxious group with her chin in the air, trying to pretend that the staring and whispered comments had no bearing on her. It helped to see that an angry Hannah was surrounded by several sheepish looking Hufflepuffs, and Luna slipped her a copy of The Quibbler on her way to her seat. She took a quick peek at the cover and was gratified to see that it already contained an article questioning The Daily Prophet's integrity. One could always count on Luna Lovegood; the rest of Hogwarts didn't know what they were missing by not being friends with her.

There was a spare seat beside Hermione and across from Harry, one that would have normally been occupied by Ron. Ginny couldn't help but notice that her ex-brother was at the other end of the table, looking at Hermione was nothing short of longing in his eyes. His

expression turned colder when he noticed Ginny sliding into what had once been his seat beside his girlfriend. He openly scowled, but Ginny ignored him in favour of spooning some scrambled eggs and bacon onto her plate. As far as she was concerned, it was too early to begin a fight at the table, and she was still too highly aware of all of the less than subtle glances in her direction to risk doing anything that might attract even more unwelcome attention.

"How is your ankle today, Hermione?" she asked, smearing strawberry jam across a piece of toast. Across from them, Harry's nose was buried in a Potions textbook, and he was sending off the kind of alarmed vibes that meant someone had a practical exam and had forgotten to study. She smothered a smile.

"No pain at all, finally," said Hermione, dabbing at her lips with her napkin. "I still have to take it easy, of course. I have to admit that magic is much faster than the muggle way, but then you can't really compare the two."

"What's the muggle way?" a third year girl asked with interest.

Hermione's brown eyes lit up, and she began eagerly explaining the concept of a cast and several weeks of recuperation to a horrified set of children. Smiling, Ginny turned back to her toast, only to see that a letter had been dropped in front of her when she wasn't looking. Her name was written across the front in simple script that she didn't recognize. A frown touched her lips as she opened the envelope and shook out the parchment that was inside. Much to her surprise, it appeared to be blank at first. Only after she'd examined it for a few minutes did words finally fade into view. She read the letter quickly, her face growing pale, and quickly crumpled it into a ball when she was finished. Harry chose that moment to look up, and his eyebrows drew together in confusion.

"What are you doing?" he asked, puzzled. He grew more concerned when she still failed to respond, and he was conscious of the fact that a few other students had begun to look at them. "Ginny, what's wrong?"

Ginny didn't answer at first. She was too busy trying to squeeze the parchment into an even smaller ball. Harry finally reached out and took the bit of parchment from her. He gently unwrapped it and smoothed it out so that he could read what it said. His eyes widened

and then narrowed, rage burning behind the vivid green as he read an extremely detailed account of what the letter writer thought should be done to dark witches who were corrupting the Boy-Who-Lived. By the time he was halfway through, his magic couldn't take it anymore. The letter burst into green flames and many of the children surrounding them gave high-pitched yelps of fright.

"Harry!" Hermione gasped, startled by the reaction. She took one look at the faces of her friends and frowned deeply, the fascinated third years instantly forgotten. "What's the matter?"

Harry just shook his head and stood up, storming away from the table without a word. Ginny looked too queasy to go after him, so Hermione took it upon herself to rise and follow after her friend as fast as she could. As they left the Great Hall, Ginny still didn't move. Her eyes were still focused on the table, and she couldn't stop thinking about that letter. It was the only she'd gotten so far, which was surprising, and no doubt the professors had probably put measures into place to hold back the majority of the hate mail. That letter had been delivered after the normal Owl Post, which was likely why it had slipped through. What she couldn't believe was the depths of cruelty and hatred that someone could hold towards a person that they had never even met. Or maybe she could – if Ginny ever had the fortune to meet Rita Skeeter, she was going to kill the woman with her bare hands, wand be damned.

A sudden, small commotion up at the staff table distracted her from her thoughts momentarily. She glanced up in time to see the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor brush Dumbledore's gently restraining hand away and finish standing up. The man – Chance Astrum, she thought his name was – came around the far end of the table and began walking down the middle aisle. Their eyes met briefly, and his hand twitched in a subtle 'come hither' motion that most people would have missed. Ginny looked back to the head table in time to see Dumbledore's annoyed expression. That was enough. Without a word to anyone at the table, she got to her feet and followed.

NIR

"Harry Potter, would you wait up?" Hermione called, deeply exasperated. In spite of her words towards Ginny, her ankle definitely wasn't prepared for a sprint through Hogwarts, and Harry

could move bloody well fast when he really wanted to. At her words, Harry stopped suddenly and turned, a guilty look on his face. She shuffled the last few steps towards him and swung her bag off of her shoulder. "Now, what's this all about?" she asked once she could breathe normally.

"That letter..." he muttered, his hands convulsively closing into fists. "Some utter bastard sent it to Ginny. You should have read it, Hermione. No, I wouldn't have wanted you to have read it. I'm ashamed that Ginny had to read it. He said... he said that she was no better than a common muggle, and that she should be immediately expelled, thrown into Azkaban, and made into a toy for the Aurors that guard the prison for daring to lead the Boy-Who-Lived off of the path of light." His face grew even darker with rage than before, and he whirled, punching the wall hard. Hermione flinched as he spat, "It was disgusting. How could they hate her so much for something that's not even true? If I ever get my hands on Rita Skeeter, I swear to Merlin..."

Hermione was pale, and suddenly she was quite glad that Harry had burnt the letter before anyone else had a chance to read it. "You know that people are rarely reasonable," she said quietly, wondering how Ginny was coping with the contents of the letter. "It's horrible that one disturbed person got the chance to write Ginny a letter like that. Worse still that she read it. But you can't let it get to you like this. Harry!" She reached out and caught his fist before he could strike the wall again. "Stop. Damaging yourself won't do any good."

"Then what will?" he asked, sounding almost desperate. His hands gripped her shoulders, holding onto her tightly. "I don't know what to do, Hermione. No one has ever done anything like that for me. Ginny told me that I wasn't the only reason, but I..." He trailed off, confusion blooming across his face. "How can I make it up to her? What do I do?"

"Sometimes you can't do anything," she answered, knowing that wasn't the response that he wanted. "Harry, it was Ginny's choice to disown herself. As cruel as it sounds, she has to live with the consequences, even if this wasn't one that anyone could have foreseen. No one could have known that Rita Skeeter was going to bring up the Chamber of Secrets." Her jaw tightened. "I'm sorry. There's nothing that you can do for her. It's not as though you can go back in time and prevent her from disowning herself to keep her

out of the public eye. I'm afraid that this time around, you'll just have to content yourself with being a good friend."

Harry covered his face and groaned loudly as he slumped against the wall and slid to the ground. "But that doesn't seem like enough," he said heavily, dropping his hands to his lap.

"It's going to have be," she said softly, causing a heavy silence to fall between the two of them. Hermione leaned against the wall and looked down at one of her best friends with a thoughtful expression. She wanted to help Harry, but for quite possibly the first time in her life, she honestly didn't know what to say to him. Sometimes it just wasn't possible for magic to fix things. That was a fact of life that most wizards had the tendency to forget. But he looked so miserable that not having an answer was making her feel guilty.

"What if she had a family name?" he asked suddenly, turning to look up at her with impossibly bright emerald eyes. "I remember the goblins at the bank looked at her strangely when they realized that she only had her first name, but I never realized that it would cause such an issue in the wizarding world. That letter she got... it was like the writer thought she could be guilty of being a dark witch just because she didn't have a family."

"I don't think that would help," Hermione said, hating to see his face fall, but she didn't want him suggesting something like that to Ginny. "It's all about having a past, Harry, and a family and a status to support you, not necessarily a family name. Ginny could easily make up a family name and have it registered through the Ministry, but it wouldn't make a difference. People would still see her as the witch who willingly disowned herself. That's not a good thing in the wizarding world, and it wouldn't change the fact that people have probably always wondered about her connection to the Chamber of Secrets." She sighed, disgusted. "Plus, I don't really think it would make her feel better about herself."

There was a thoughtful look on Harry's face that suggested he was contemplating something entirely different, and Hermione's eyes narrowed as she began to understand how his question could be interpreted in a different way. She opened her mouth, intending to caution him, but closed it when she caught sight of the determination in his eyes. It wouldn't make a difference, she realized, even if she explained that what he was thinking about might only make the

public angrier. When Harry got his mind set on an idea, he wouldn't allow anyone to dissuade him from it. He had come up with an idea that might help to protect Ginny, and he was no doubt dead set on seeing it through no matter what the personal cost or how someone else might see it. Hermione swallowed her protests, appreciating all over again what a hero complex he possessed, and sighed.

"Just be careful, okay?" she said reluctantly. "Familial bonds can be dangerous, Harry. There are many kinds and each one means something different. Don't do anything rash."

He shot her a sheepish smile. "Don't worry, Hermione. I wouldn't do anything without taking a page from your book and doing tons of research. Besides, I don't even know if it can be done." As he spoke, Harry got to his feet, as though having a plan had given him extra strength. "I won't even ask for your help, since I know you're busy trying to catch up with classes and researching for Ron."

"You must really feel bad," she said in amazement, staring at him.

A flush spread up his neck and into his cheeks, and he looked away, embarrassed. "I told you, I just don't really think it's fair," he mumbled, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Ginny deserves more. I know what it's like to be ostracized and criticized for things beyond your control. She's worth more than that."

A speculative gleam flashed into Hermione's eyes, and a slow smile curved her lips. "Of course she is, Harry. I think it's very sweet of you to want to make Ginny's life better."

"Err, we should go to, err, class," he muttered hastily, blushing an even darker shade of red. Hermione muffled her laugh with her hand, pleased in spite of herself as she watched him hasten down the hall. He was moving too quickly again, but this time it didn't bother her as much. She'd seen something very promising in the last few minutes, and as much as it would kill her to take a step back and remain quiet no matter how badly things went, she made a silent vow to do just that.

NIR

Chance Astrum leaned back in his chair and surveyed the girl sitting across from him, taking careful note of the auburn hair and gold-

flecked eyes. It was a complete change to the orangey-red hair and plain brown eyes that he'd seen before, but it suited her far better. Ginny was sipping from a cup of hot chocolate and didn't appear to have noticed his close level of scrutiny, but there was no doubt in his mind that she was fully aware of him and his office and was calmly waiting for him to make his move. She had been, after all, the sister of the twins, and that meant she had both patience and a devious mind in spades. As guilty as he felt for having forced her to make that promise, he was relieved that she had chosen to follow through with it. Harry would need those qualities during the war. He just wished that he could tell her as much.

"I'm sure you're wondering why I called you in here," he said at last, smoothly breaking the silence that had fallen. "Do you prefer to be called Miss Ginevra, or is there another name...?"

"You can call me Ginny," she said with a tiny smile. "Just Ginny."

"Ginny." He nodded. "Professor Dumbledore explained to me that you would be absent this week. I gave all of my students a rough quiz to gain a better understanding of where their level of defence is at. I'd like you to make an appointment with me to take the same quiz before class on Monday so that you won't be too far behind." It wasn't the way that he would have liked to have begun his classes, but he'd figured that it was important knowledge to have on file. Most of the students were clearly suffering from a basic lack of defence knowledge, and that would only serve to hurt them when it came time to fight in the war if he didn't fill the gaps.

"I'm available at any point," said Ginny, shrugging. "I could take the quiz now if you like."

"I have strict orders to let you rest," Chance told her. "Otherwise, I wouldn't mind at all." Actually, he would have preferred it. Out of all the people that had known Sirius Black, he firmly believed that Ginny had the second best chance of figuring out his real identity. Remus, of course, would have had the best chance, but everyone knew how close that the two of them had been, and for that reason, their interactions would be heavily monitored by Dumbledore. However, only Remus was aware of the fact that Sirius and Ginny had become quite close during the summer, having spent several nights together in the kitchen. He couldn't quite let go of the hope

that Ginny might recognize the truth if she were to spend enough time around him.

Unfortunately, the same really couldn't be said for Harry. As much as Chance loved his godson, he wasn't all that close to Harry, as their time together had been short at best. It was something he wanted to be sure to rectify as soon as possible... and that meant he had to find some way to get out from under the wizard's oath that Dumbledore had asked him to give. He couldn't run the risk of telling anyone that he was Sirius Black, but if someone else just happened to figure it out, well, that was a whole different story. With that thought in mind, he leaned forward and looked intently at Ginny, who raised her eyebrows and shot him a curious glance.

"I've heard from several of the professors that you're a rather proficient young witch, Ginny. They've told me that you helped Harry Potter to run a defence club last year?" he asked.

"Harry did most of the work," she said immediately, without missing a beat. "Actually, he did all of the work. Him and Hermione Granger. I was just a student, that's all."

"A good student," he pointed out. There hadn't really been a need for him to ask the other professors about her progress. He already knew that Ginny was one powerful witch. Her presence would be invaluable for a defence club, and it was the perfect excuse for them to be around each other a fair amount. "I've been thinking that the club was actually a really good idea and I'd like to start it up again. It gives students the chance to practice duelling with different ages and power levels, and, since there's only so much that can be taught in a couple hours a week, more education." A wry smile spread over his face. "I think that it would be beneficial for a lot of students to join up. I was hoping that you, Miss Granger, and Mr Potter would be able to give me a hand with it."

"Really?" Ginny's eyes widened slightly with interest. "Wow... Are you sure you wouldn't rather have Ron Weasley's help?" Her lip curled at the name, but she pressed on. "He helped Harry and Hermione more than I did, last year."

"I'm sure," Chance said firmly. Even if he had been unaware of the problems between the Golden Trio, he wasn't sure he would have wanted Ron to be in a position that would require him to teach other

students. The boy was a brilliant strategist, but he had a quick and explosive temper. Not the best of qualifications when it came to being a good or reliable teacher. "If you're concerned about the demand on your time, it would be minimal. You'd be required to show up at every meeting, which would probably be a couple of nights a week, but you'd get extra credit, and I might have the occasional opportunity to teach you an extra hex or curse."

Ginny gave him a small smile. "Maybe I could think about it," she concluded. "If you really think that my quiz score will be good enough, then I'd love to help. The D.A. was a huge help last year, when our professor wasn't... well, she wasn't very good." She spoke the words with a certain amount of tact that Dolores Umbridge hadn't deserved.

"I've heard," Chance said with a shake of his head. "That's one of the reasons that Professor Dumbledore decided to allow me to teach at the school in the first place. He was concerned that the Ministry would try to send someone like the toad over." He grinned when Ginny choked on her hot chocolate. "And for good reason. Most of the students I've spoken to have memorized last year's textbook, but their practical skills are suffering. That's where I'm hoping the defence club can come in."

"Well, just let me know what Harry and Hermione say," said Ginny, placing her cup on the corner of his desk. She folded her hands in her lap. "When would you like me to come in and take the quiz?"

He pretended to consider the question. "How does Sunday afternoon sound? That gives you time to go to Hogsmeade on Saturday if you want. I remember how important that trip is. You can come in around three. The quiz shouldn't take more than half an hour, but I'd also like the opportunity to test your duelling skills before the club. I might ask Mr Potter and Miss Granger to join us."

"Sure, that sounds great. Thank you, Professor." Ginny stood up.

"No, thank you," Chance answered, rising to see her out of the room. Once he was sure she had gone, he sat back down and gazed thoughtfully at the desk. The talk about the defence club seemed to have temporarily smoothed over whatever had been making her so upset, and he was glad for that. Her depression weighed heavily on his conscience. One thing that he had never had the chance to talk

to Ginny about was the fact that no one except for his immediate friends had taken it well when he'd been disowned – and he hadn't even been slandered by the press nor had an event like the Chamber of Secrets hanging over him. He had the feeling that trouble was only just beginning, and that she, along with his godson, was going to be in the thick of it.

A small silver orb on his desk began to whistle, distracting him from his thoughts. Realizing that it was nearly time for his first class to begin, Chance sighed and began to gather his things together, knowing that it wouldn't look right if the professor was late. The meeting with Ginny had gone as well as he could have hoped; the basis had been set both of the defence club and for her to realize that he was truly Sirius Black in disguise. All he could do now was sit back and wait for things to take their natural course. Too bad that waiting was the one thing that he had always sucked at the most.

NIR

The small clearing on the far side of the lake, away from where the usual Hogwarts student would choose to go, offered privacy and a little shelter from less appealing weather. Loosely encircled by trees and shrubbery that kept anyone walking by from seeing what they might have been doing, the clearing had gradually been warded with the strongest silencing and privacy spells that they could think of, keyed only to their own personal magical signatures. Every year, as the four girls learned more, new spells were added on, until it was a place that even an exceptionally strong witch or wizard would have had difficulty breaking into. In short, it had become something of a sanctuary, a place where no one else could get to them.

Ginny couldn't help giving a soft sigh of relief as she strode through the barrier and just stood still for a moment, relishing in the fact that she didn't have to worry about prying stares or owls from the disapproving wizarding world. Since that morning, she'd received nearly a dozen more letters, each no doubt worse than the last, and she'd learned to burn anything, including packages, that came from a person she didn't know. It had gotten so bad that Professor McGonagall had stopped her in the hall after she'd left Professor Astrum's office and told her that from that moment on, spells had been set in place to insure that all of her mail would be directed to the woman's office so that she could personally check for dangerous hexes, curses, or anything else that might be an attempt to hurt

Ginny before passing it along. Apparently the house elves had been charged with the task before, but there had been so many letters that the tiny creatures had been unable to get them all.

"Bloody wizarding world," she muttered, running a hand through her hair. If it weren't for Rita Skeeter, the news likely would have been accepted with a lot less outcry. But considering what had happened at the end of last year, when Harry's claims about Voldemort's return had been proven right, the public was in need of a new person to take the fall. Apparently her decision to disown herself had come around at the perfect time.

"Don't blame the wizarding world for one obnoxious bitch," came a voice behind her. Ginny turned slightly and saw that Astoria, Luna, and Hannah had arrived in a group. Astoria pulled her scarf loose and frowned in Ginny's direction. "You know that if Rita Skeeter weren't blowing things out of proportion and mentioning the Chamber, most people wouldn't really care."

"Maybe your father could do an issue in The Quibbler, Luna," said Hannah, dropping her bag on the ground. She arched her back in a stretch, wincing. "In addition to the one he did today. You know, get the truth out there?"

Luna swept her long blonde hair over her shoulder and considered this. "Perhaps. But only if Ginny would be alright sharing an issue about fluxies. My father has been waiting a long time to do an article about them and they really only come out during the first weeks of Autumn. But they're very bad luck and even just being written about in the same magazine could make it spread. That's why he planned to devote a whole issue to them."

"I'll have to think about it, then," Ginny said, trying not to laugh. It was amazing how much better the presence of her friends made her feel. "I feel like I've already had bad luck in spades. Not sure I want to do anything else to attract more."

"Oh, I don't know. If the bad luck you've had resulted in that picture of you and Harry coming out of Gringotts together, I wouldn't mind a little of it," Hannah teased, tying her shorter, dark blonde hair into two pigtails to help keep it out of the way. She grinned when Ginny blushed. "I thought you two looked very cozy."

"Do shut up, Hannah," Ginny mumbled, pulling her robes off. Underneath she was wearing a simple jean skirt and a white blouse. Her friends were dressed similarly. "Did we come here to train or not?"

Hannah smirked. "We'll drop it... for now." She turned towards Luna. "What do we want to begin with?"

"I know we were supposed to duel today, but I could really use some time to just connect and get back into tune," Ginny said hesitantly. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not. You and Astoria go ahead," said Luna, her voice unusually gentle. "Hannah and I can duel. I picked up some new spells the other day from the library that I'd like to try before we connect."

"Leave me to be the guinea pig," Hannah muttered, drawing her wand out of her pocket.

"I thought that's what Hufflepuffs were for?" Astoria said innocently. She dodged the stinging hex that Hannah aimed at her and beckoned to Ginny, leading the other girl over to a corner of the clearing. While Luna and Hannah waited in the center, she drew a quick ward around herself and Ginny that would prevent them from being struck by any stray spells or hexes. With a quick nod to her friends to let them know that they could begin, she glanced at Ginny. "You want to mediate alone or connect?"

"I need to connect. I feel so rattled lately," she confessed, taking a seat on the ground and folding her legs. Astoria sat down in front of her, so close that their knees were touching. Ginny reached out with her left hand and took Astoria's right hand, twining their fingers together, and held her wand up with her right. A small smile playing around her lips, Astoria lifted her wand with her left hand and touched the end to Ginny's so that the tips crossed. Both girls closed their eyes at the same time and summoned their magic. Both wands began to shimmer, one with a golden glow and the other with a silvery sheen, both of which turned a pure white where the wands crossed.

Two sets of lungs inhaled together, holding for the same count of seven before releasing. Ginny shivered slightly as their magic met

and twined together in a familiar dance. She would never get tired of the feeling of their combined magic. It was extremely dangerous, what they were doing: it would have been easy for her to cripple Astoria's magic irreparably or vice versa. At that point, a single thought was all that it would take. That was why the ancient practice of partner magic, while not forbidden, was severely frowned upon in spite of how much more powerful two people were when their magic was combined. Complete trust was required between the two partners for a connection to even be formed, and it had taken both Ginny and Astoria a great deal of work to be able to get to the point where their connection could be formed almost instantly with just a touch or their eyes meeting.

The disowning meant that Ginny's magic had changed a bit, and she could feel a strange fizzing as Astoria's magic investigated and adapted to accept the differences. She could sense that Astoria was smiling and felt her own lips curving in response. For the first time in over two weeks, she dropped all of her shields, allowing her partner to feel the full range of her emotions. Astoria reciprocated an act which had always been difficult for the reserved Slytherin. Feelings that weren't her own bombarded Ginny in a rush, and it took her a moment to work through all of them. Fear, surprise, concern, happiness... she drew them into herself and sighed, contented.

It took several minutes for their physical, emotional, and spiritual states to come together and blend. At that point, Ginny became aware of the duel that was going on just outside of their own comfortable sphere. She cracked an eye and watched Hannah and Luna duelling, both of them using spells well beyond what an average fifth or sixth year student would use. Neither of them had connected yet, she could tell, which was surprising. Unlike she and Astoria, who challenged each other separately first, Luna and Hannah usually preferred to connect first before duelling to put them on more even grounds.

"Shall we?" Astoria whispered, both inside Ginny's head and out.

"Let's," the redhead agreed with a giggle.

"Aguamenti!" they said together.

A waterfall of water exploded out of the ends of their crossed wands and scored a direct hit on the unsuspecting Hannah and Luna. Poor

Hannah got the brunt of it, as she'd been closest. She was completely saturated by the time the spell had ended. Ginny and Astoria burst into laughter as the Hufflepuff gasped and shoved her sopping hair out of her face, glaring at the both of them. Even Luna was having difficulty keeping her amused smile off of her face. Even though she had been hit as well, her clothing and hair was just damp in comparison to Hannah, who was actually dripping.

"Very funny!" Hannah complained, a small smile breaking across her face in spite of herself. "The two of you are connected. That gives you an unfair advantage!"

"So connect and let's get to it," Ginny proposed, a wicked glint in her eyes as Astoria grinned. As she had hoped, connecting with Astoria had soothed her in a way that few other things could. She felt calm, confident, and ready for a duel, no longer ready to fly off the handle at the next problem that popped up. Hannah and Luna exchanged exasperated but fond looks when they heard her tone. They were in for an interesting fight.

Please review!

A/N: Thank you for the reviews. They were much appreciated. It really does encourage me to write! You guys don't even realize how close you came to not having a chapter this week. I beat NaNo on November 16, and that took just about everything I had. I had about two days to write four different chapters of fanfiction, and that's a lot to ask even for me! Now that I'm done, please enjoy while I go fall into a writing induced coma...

Early the next morning, Ginny got out of bed long before the rest of her dorm mates and went to take a shower. She normally liked showering at night, but Hogwarts had communal showers, and it wasn't fun to bathe with people who were afraid of you. The knowledge that her fifth year was turning out to be exactly like her second year weighed heavily on her shoulder as she stripped off her pyjamas and switched the water on as hot as she could bear. At first, it had been kind of funny to walk down the hall and see people stop talking, but that had only lasted for about ten minutes. Now it was just getting frustrating. Her friends at Hogwarts had always been few and far between, but she had dared to hope that joining the Quidditch team and being an active participant in the D.A. the year before would have made some sort of difference. Apparently not.

She made quick work of washing her hair and body and emerged from the shower about fifteen minutes later, feeling much better. Her day was planned already, as Hermione had cornered her the night before and asked her to go to Hogsmeade along with her and Harry, so that they could make a stop at the bookstore and search for some extra research material on Ron. Harry had been oddly receptive to the idea of going to the bookstore, which was a place he normally avoided at all costs, and since Ginny didn't have any other plans, she'd agreed. Luna was working on homework, Hannah had a special day planned out with her crush/boyfriend, and she and Astoria couldn't be seen together in public. It was better than spending the day alone, even if she didn't relish the thought of trying to pry Hermione out of the bookstore when they were done.

After drying her hair with a quick charm, she got dressed in a blouse and jeans and slipped on a pair of shoes before she went downstairs to the Common Room. As it was still fairly early, she figured that she would be alone. A low moan told her differently. Expecting to see a pair of students breaking the rules by snogging, she was surprised and dismayed to see Harry sprawled over the couch closest to the fireplace. He groaned again and grabbed at his

forehead as Ginny rushed to his side, raking his blunt nails over the tender skin. Worried, she brushed a black curl off of his face and saw that his scar was a deep, ugly shade of red. It seemed to be painning him quite a bit, and she found herself torn between running for Hermione, summoning Professor McGonagall, and staying by his side.

"Harry, I'm here," she whispered, sliding her hand into his after a brief moment of hesitation. The contact seemed to help a little, as Harry's soft cries stopped, though his face remained twisted in some unidentifiable emotion. His hand tightened around hers until her fingers began to ache, but she didn't try to make him let go. She sat tensely, whispering comforting words to him, until his grip loosened without her prompting. "Harry, can you hear me? It's Ginny. Wake up."

Slowly, emerald green eyes fluttered open. Harry looked at her blankly for a moment before recognition dawned and he sighed, placing his free hand against his scar and rubbing gently. "I have such a headache."

"Do you want me to get Madame Pomfrey?" she asked.

"No. She usually can't do anything to help," he muttered, making an attempt to sit up. He fell back against the cushion when she made no move to help him, uttering a frustrated and exhausted growl. "Fuck, I am so bloody sick of this!"

"What happened?" Ginny asked, though she had a pretty good guess.

"Voldemort. I had another vision." He looked off into the distance and his brow furrowed, his grip on her hand tightening briefly. "I can't remember what it was about. He said something about a plan working out perfectly... And he wanted his Death Eaters to do something..." Grimacing, he rubbed fiercely at his scar and shook his head. His voice was haunted when he added, "I think he was pleased. That's never a good sign."

"No, I suppose not," she said softly, feeling worried. Harry looked absolutely haggard. His face was pale, and deep circles lined the flesh under his eyes. "Do you... want to tell the Headmaster?"

Harry shot her a wry look. "Tell him what? That I had a vision I can't remember? That I can't really tell him anything at all? What good would that do?" Abruptly, he realized that he was holding onto her hand like a lifeline. A blush spread across his cheeks and he dropped it rather hastily, instead fisting his hands on his lap. Ginny hid a smile as she stood up and sat down beside him on the couch. It seemed to make him more comfortable than when she was kneeling in front of him.

"It couldn't hurt to let someone know," she ventured. "Though I don't know who you would go to." That pretty much summed up the whole problem, didn't it? No one ever wanted to listen to them, especially Harry, even though they were at the center of the whole bloody war. She curled a strand of hair around her finger and watched anxiously as Harry rested his face in his hands with a weary sigh. The fact that there was nothing else she could do for him was driving her crazy, and that made her remember his desire to learn. "Harry, why don't we begin your lessons in Occlumency tonight, after we come home from Hogsmeade?"

"I guess that would be a good idea," he agreed, looking pleased that she had remembered. "I don't know if it will be enough to keep that bastard out of my head, but I've got to try something."

"Have you been having visions often?" she asked.

"Pretty much every night," he admitted. "But I don't... I never remember them when I wake up. I just can't go back to sleep afterwards because I keep getting this feeling that he's happy about something. I've been watching the paper, but I haven't seen a reason for it yet." A distressed look crossed his face. "I don't know what to do anymore."

Ginny chewed on her lip, hoping to mask the concern that she was pretty sure showed on her face anyway. Harry hadn't been sleeping well, that much was obvious, and it wasn't good. The more exhausted he got, the easier it would be for Voldemort to break through his defences. But from the sound of it, every time he made an attempt to sleep, the visions were there, tormenting him. It was a vicious circle. Her heart swelled with pity, and she instinctively reached out and brushed her fingers along his cheek. He lifted his head and turned to look at her with a startled expression. A shy

smile broke out across her lips and she cleared her throat before she spoke.

"You can come to me if you want," she said quietly. When he opened his mouth to protest, she covered his lips with her index finger so that she could finish speaking before he got wound up. "I know you don't have anyone else. Remus is off doing things for the order. Sirius is..." She swallowed hard, not quite able to say those terrible words in relation to someone who had always been as in love with life as Sirius Black. "And Dumbledore... I don't think either of us can trust him right now. Even Hermione is busy trying to handle the research with Ron. So whenever you have a nightmare, I want you to wake me up, okay? You can send Hedwig, or we'll find some method in Hogsmeade for us to communicate, since boys can't get into the girl's dormitories. But I want you to promise me that you'll wake me up so that we can talk about it. This isn't something you should have to go through alone."

Harry didn't say anything for a moment. His emerald green eyes were searching her face intently, looking for something. Whether he found it or not, she wasn't sure, but he nodded. "Alright," he said finally, surprising the both of them. "I'll do it, if you're sure that you don't mind."

"I don't," Ginny said calmly, inwardly thrilled. She couldn't believe that Harry had agreed to confide in her. His visions had always been something that he suffered through on his own. During her fourth year, Ron had spent hours bitching about the fact that Harry always wanted to keep his visions a secret, so she knew how much of an honour that she had just been granted. It immediately became her first priority to find something that would allow the two of them to communicate at night. "You should go and get dressed, Harry. If you're not down here when Hermione is, I have no doubt she'll be up there to fetch you."

He grimaced. "The sad thing is, that's not an exaggeration," he said wryly. Rising to his feet, he stopped and reached out to touch her shoulder. "Thank you, Ginny. I don't have very many people I can trust right now."

The implied "but you are one of them" made a brilliant smile cross her face. Harry smiled back before he headed up the stairs, leaving Ginny alone in the Common Room, though not for long. Hogsmeade

weekends were one of those few times that most students didn't bother sleeping in until the last possible minute. For once, she took no notice of the soft whispers and stares that she was granted to. Instead, she gazed into the fire and thought, quite dreamily, about Harry Potter and how much she loved him. At one time, she'd felt nothing more for him than a silly crush, but it had solidified into something so intense and real and warm that she couldn't help shivering. How was it possible to love one person so much?

She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she didn't even notice Hermione's presence until a quill tickled her nose. Ginny yelped and batted the offending feather away. Hermione laughed and sat down beside her, pointedly placing her pack at the end so that no one else would have the nerve to try to sit down as well. There was an annoyingly knowing look on her face that made Ginny feel instantly wary, washing away the previous warmth that she had been enshrouded in. If there was one negative point to having Hermione as a friend, it was the fact that the older girl did not know how to mind her own business.

"You look very happy," Hermione said slyly, a twinkle in her brown eyes. "Was that Harry I saw heading up to his dormitory?"

"We were just talking," Ginny replied, realizing too late that she sounded kind of defensive. She looked away and huffed, a little embarrassed. Outside of her quartet, Hermione and Sirius (and possibly Remus, since there were next to no secrets between mates) were the only ones who had known that she was so deeply in love with Harry. Hermione had taken an odd stance on the subject; although she encouraged Ginny not to give up, she had often reminded the younger girl of the fact that Harry didn't see her as anything more than a friend, and not a close one at that. Even though she knew that Hermione had been trying to keep her from getting her hopes up, it still made her wary to share any developments. And yet, who knew Harry better than Hermione? Reluctantly, she said, "I think we're getting a little closer."

"I don't doubt it," answered the brunette, flipping open a book and reclining on the couch. "You did something for Harry that no one else has ever done. He doesn't have very many people who care about him the way you do, and on some level, I think he's starting to understand that."

Ginny pondered this. She had no doubt that Hermione was right, but... "I don't want him to know I'm in love with him just yet," she said softly, making sure that no one else would be able to overhear. "He's not ready. Harry was so embarrassed by it back then, and he thought it was just a silly schoolgirl crush even when it wasn't. I... I don't want him to treat it that way again. My feelings..." Her voice trailed off, and she looked down, unable to put it into words. Her feelings were fragile, yet so strong that sometimes she thought she would suffocate under the force of them. "Merlin. I didn't know it was possible to love someone so much."

"I envy you," Hermione said quietly, not looking up from her book.

"You what? Why?" Ginny blinked in astonishment, wondering if all of those books had finally made Hermione lose her mind. There was nothing enviable about her situation.

"Because you love him." At last giving into the urge to raise her head, Hermione gave a painful smile as she gazed at the fire. "I see the way you look at him, Ginny. It's like Harry is everything to you. You love him so much and that just... it absolutely amazes me. I mean, I love Ron, but I don't think I could give up my family, my whole identity, just to be with him. What exists between you and Harry is something special, and I don't think I could ever have that with Ron."

"Hermione..." Staring at her friend, Ginny fell silent for a moment, wondering what her reaction should be. Choosing her words carefully, she whispered, "It's not a good place to be, where I am. If Harry fell in love with someone else, I would be happy for him, but it would kill me inside. I don't think there would ever be someone else. It will always be him." She wanted to look away from the sympathy in Hermione's eyes, but she forced herself to keep staring, willing Hermione to understand. "What you have with Ron might not be as strong, but I do believe that he loves you, even if he is an arse. If you two work together, I know you have the chance to make something wonderful that would last forever."

"Maybe..." Looking thoughtful, Hermione broke their staring contest to glance back down at her book and make a quick note with her quill. "Ginny... I don't want you to give up on Harry. Keep loving him, okay?"

She gave a soft laugh in response. "Oh, you don't have to worry about that. I'm pretty sure I'm in for the long haul." It had been meant as a joking comment, but there was an underlying tinge of bitterness that made both of them wince. Fortunately, before Hermione could comment on it, Harry came back down the stairs, this time dressed in a pair of casual pants, a green t-shirt, and a warm black cloak that had been a gift from the twins.

"You ready?" he asked, looking at them.

"Yes!" Ginny shot to her feet, relieved that the conversation was over. Hermione wouldn't pry when Harry was around. The boy was blessed with excellent timing. "Let's skip breakfast and head straight to Hogsmeade. I'm not in the mood to deal with everyone in the Great Hall today."

"Sounds good to me." Hermione tucked her book and quill back into her bag and got up, slinging her bag over her shoulder. "The sooner we get there, the sooner we can search the bookstores."

"Ugh, I forgot about that part of it," Ginny groaned. Harry muffled a snort with his hand as Hermione rolled her eyes.

The three of them headed out the portrait and made their way down to the entrance hall, where Argus Filch was already standing guard against any of the younger children who might want to make an attempt at slipping out. Being that it was still quite early, there wasn't much of a wait. Argus ticked off their names and scowled at them as they walked by. Harry was seriously contemplating casting a hex on him and actually pulled his wand out of his pocket, but Hermione firmly grabbed his arm and hauled him down the path, leaving Ginny to trail behind, laughing helplessly as Hermione began to scold him about pulling pranks on people who were 'practically professors'.

"I wasn't really going to do, okay?" Harry said, sounding exasperated. When Hermione huffed and turned away, he winked at Ginny and mouthed, "Yes I was."

"I saw that, Harry Potter," Hermione said sharply, unable to keep her mouth from twitching with mirth. "Like you haven't had enough trouble this year? You really need to cause more?"

"Yes, Mum," came the mischievous response. Hermione rolled her eyes and strode ahead of the two of them, shaking her head. Grinning, Harry fell into step beside Ginny. She tilted her head and studied him when he wasn't paying attention, wondering if he was truly feeling better or if he was putting on an act of some kind. Judging by the joy she could see in his eyes, she figured it was the former, and looked away, fighting back her own smile. How many times had she wished that she would be going to Hogsmeade by his side?

"Just for that, we really are going to the bookstore first," Hermione called back, smirking when she heard the sound of two groans. She entered the town first and looked around with an appreciative gaze. No matter how many times she saw Hogsmeade, it never failed to enchant her. The little town was positively picturesque in every season. Knowing better than to get too far ahead, she paused to wait for her two friends and then ushered them down the street, ignoring the longing looks sent towards Zonko's and Honeydukes. There was something far more important than chocolate and jokes at stake, and she was determined to have her time in the shop.

Tomes & Scrolls was one of Hermione's favourite stores. Like most of the Hogsmeade shops, it was larger on the inside than the outer appearance would indicate, and it had an old-fashioned, homey feel that appealed to her on every level. Walking inside made her feel like she had found a place where she belonged. Hermione took a deep, happy breath as she pushed the door open, enjoying the sound of the twinkling bell. Harry and Ginny exchanged fond but exasperated looks as Hermione immediately took off into the depths of the store, disappearing almost instantly between two tall, towering stacks of books. No doubt the girl had the entire store mapped out and knew exactly where to look for what she wanted.

"Well, since there's no use in even trying to help Hermione, is there anything you're looking for?" she asked, turning to look at Harry. He was glancing the shop, obviously trying to figure out if there was a method to the way that it had been laid out.

"I just thought I'd look for a few books on Occlumency," he answered. "And maybe a few on Defence and animagus training."

Ginny's eyes lit up at the mention of animagi. "Are you interested in trying to learn?" she inquired, unable to keep the excitement out of

her voice. Sirius had once offered to teach her, but before they could get very far, the summer had ended and she'd gone back to school. She'd never gotten the chance to pick it back up with him. "I've always wanted to see if I have the aptitude for it."

"Why don't you go look for those books?" Harry suggested. "I wouldn't have the slightest idea of what I was looking for. I'll track down the other ones I'm looking for and meet you there. Then we can find a couple on Occlumency. I'm sure we'll have time, as it's going to take hours to pry Hermione away from this place."

"Alright." Ginny twisted and glanced at a small piece of parchment that had been fastened to the wall beside the door. She touched a finger to the center of it and said, "Point Me Animagus."

A dull red shimmer passed over the parchment before a map of the store formed, with a clear trail written out in vivid blue ink for her to follow. She was supposed to head right, then left, straight for a couple of aisles, then left again. Ginny followed the directions perfectly and passed right by Hermione, who was so involved in the book she was working her way through that she didn't even notice Ginny, and found herself standing in front of a small shelf of books that detailed the process of becoming an animagus. Some of the books were fairly old, so she picked up one of the newer ones - *The Animal Within: Rewritten by Josephine Stanz* - and flipped through it slowly.

Becoming an animagus was rare if only because not every witch or wizard had the ability to do so. Certain charms or spells, accidents as a child, or even a magical inheritance could destroy the ability even if it had been present. She knew from Sirius's stories that it had taken him, James, and Peter several years to learn how to do it properly, but that was partly because the three of them hadn't had access to the proper channels and equipments. There were potions that could be created to help speed up the process, and in 1990, a potions master by the name of Archibald Prince had actually created a particularly important potion that would force the transformation for the first time, giving the drinker time to absorb the way a transformation should feel. The ingredients, however, looked kind of expensive and were no doubt difficult to get.

She tucked that book underneath her arm and moved on to the next one, which gave a lot more detail about that animagus potion. It was

complicated, requiring either two weeks or a month to brew depending on whether one started on the full moon, and there were lots of smaller stages that added up to the larger one. At least a NEWT-level potion, if not higher, but she suspected that Hermione would be able to do it no problem. Harry and she, on the other hand... Potions was a very exacting science, and while her grades were usually alright, she was no master. That might present a problem.

"How are you doing?" she heard someone ask. Ginny turned, expecting to see Harry behind her, but there was no one there. Frowning, she leaned around the corner and was shocked to see Draco Malfoy leaning against the bookshelf and looking down at Hermione, who had actually turned her attention away from her book.

"I hardly see how that's any of your business, Granger," Malfoy said, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. He looked tired, and in the dim shop lighting, his face was pale and tired. Ginny felt a quick flash of sympathy, something that startled her so much that she almost dropped her books on the floor. She rested her weight against the shelf for support, realizing that she hadn't stopped to consider that the fact that she was no longer a Weasley meant that she could form bonds with people like the Malfoys. It was an entirely disturbing yet enlightening thought.

"You're the one who came over to me. I was trying to make polite conversation," Hermione said, seemingly not bothered by the cold tone. She closed the book that she had balanced on her knee and sighed. Her voice, when she spoke, came out small and somewhat depressed. "Malfoy, do you know of any spells that are manifested in orange light?"

"Orange light?" His eyebrows arched in confusion, and he shot her a doubtful look, clearly wondering why she would be after something like that. "That's a dangerous color to be messing around with."

"I know. Ron was hit by a spell that color during the Battle at the Department of Mysteries," she answered, looking rather helplessly at the books around her. "I think that might be partly what's wrong with him. But nothing I've searched so far has a conclusive answer, and I'm running out of texts to look through."

Ginny blinked and shook her head slowly, wondering if she was hearing correctly. Was Hermione actually confiding in Draco Malfoy? And... was he actually bending down to help her? Shocked and amazed, she backed out of sight before retreating into the main part of the shop. Astoria had always tried to convince her that Malfoy had the ability to be a nice person when he wanted to be, but because of the lack of familial bonds, Ginny had never been able to see it. The best she had been able to do was remain neutral, which, while not exactly fair to Astoria, had been acceptable. Now she was only just beginning to understand that maybe... just maybe... Malfoy wasn't a complete snake in the grass, and the thought was completely unsettling.

"Hey, watch it!" Hands reached out to grab her shoulders just before she tripped over a stack of books. Ginny found herself looking up at Harry. "Are you okay, Gin?" he asked, frowning. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"No, just the end of the world as we know it," she muttered in reply, rubbing her forehead. "Or hell freezing over. One of those two."

"What?" Harry looked at her uncertainly. He was carrying a couple of books in his hands that he shifted under his opposite arm. "Have you seen Hermione? I'd like to see what she thinks of these before I buy them."

"No!" she burst out, thinking that Hermione's favourite store would be no more if Harry and Malfoy got into a fight. "I mean... She looked really busy, Harry. With how hard she's been working to figure this stuff out about Ron, I think you should just let her be. What are the books? Can I help?"

Green eyes widened slightly, and Harry turned slightly, keeping the books away from her as he said, "I don't think it's something you have a lot of experience in, Gin, so I'm not sure you can help. It's for Herbology. We have to write an essay on a plant of our choice, but it has to be at a sixth year level."

"Oh, I see," she said slowly, looking at him out of the corner of her eye. It would have been an ideal time to explain that with a close friend like Hannah, she had advanced Herbology information shoved down her throat nearly every day, but it was obvious that Harry didn't want to share the books with her for some reason. Even

though she was more than willing to give him his privacy, that stung, a little. Okay, more than a little. She had thought that they were becoming closer than that, but maybe she was wrong. Clearing her throat, she handed him the animagus books. "Here, I found these. I think they'll be a good starting point."

"Thanks." Without glancing at them, he tucked them under his arm with the rest of the books. "Should we look for ones about Occlumency? I think they're over there somewhere..."

"Are you sure you need me for that?" Ginny asked, half tempted to make some kind of excuse about meeting with one of her other friends. Even though she didn't want him to know about her feelings quite yet, Harry was sometimes so hard to be around when he had such an effect on her, yet remained completely oblivious to it.

He shot her a crooked grin. "Of course I do. What I don't know about Occlumency could fill every book in this shop and then some. I have no idea what books I should be looking into. I somehow doubt they make an "Occlumency for Dummies" book."

Her lips twitched, and in spite of herself, she wanted to smile. "Well, no, but there are books for beginners that should be – " She stopped, suddenly, at the sound of crashing and screaming and... laughter. Their eyes connected as twin expressions of shock and horror dawned at the realization of what Voldemort had been so pleased about. Death Eaters were attacking Hogsmeade.

Please review!

A/N: Seems I managed to surprise quite a few people with the attack at the end of the previous chapter... Good~! Can't have you all being on the same page with me. That's just no fun at all. Thanks for the reviews, though you should know that in spite of how many people want it to happen, it will be some time before the H/G relationship gets serious. I'm a fan of developing relationships slowly (one reason I like to ignore the sixth book, thank you JKR) and so I'm afraid Harry isn't just going to fall into Ginny's arms any time soon. But in the meantime... enjoy anyway.

Note: To my knowledge (and I did a bit of research on it), we're never told what color robes Aurors wear in the books. But they must have official uniforms, so I decided to go with purple. If anyone can point me to a confirmed source – an interview, for example – with more detail, I'd be much obliged and willing to change it.

Harry snapped out of his shocked daze first, his face growing determined. As the crashing, screams and fearful cries from outside grew louder, he thrust the books that he had been holding into Ginny's arms and took two steps towards the door, pulling his wand from his pocket in one smooth motion. Ginny leapt after him, grabbing his arm with her free hand, and pulled back sharply, holding on with all of her weight. She knew that if Harry went out there, he would likely be hurt, captured, or outright killed. Not only was he tired from lack of sleep, he hadn't yet, and that was not the ideal condition in which to fight a war. For her trouble, she received a look of annoyed frustration and Harry trying to yank his arm free as he opened his mouth to scold her. But before he could say anything, the little bell above the shop door twinkled, and they heard voices at the front.

"I'm sure there's nothing in here. Why aren't we out there having fun?" a male voice whined. "I've always wanted to have some fun with that uppity Rosmerta bitch. I bet she'd scream so nicely..."

"Shut your mouth. You heard the orders from our lord. Spread out and search!" a woman ordered.

Wand still in hand, Harry changed objectives. He wrapped an arm around Ginny's shoulders and steered her quickly towards the back of the shop, moving as silently as possible. Ginny went with him willingly, relieved that he wasn't going to do something stupid like confront the Death Eaters. In such a small, confined space, that

would be suicide. She spared a thought for Hermione and Malfoy and hoped that the two of them would be able to find somewhere to hide as they reached the back wall. Harry ushered her down the last aisle to the very end, where the shadows made it difficult to see. The two of them crouched down facing the open end, wands held at the ready, in case one of the Death Eaters got too close for comfort.

"Do you know how to cast the Disillusionment Charm?" Harry whispered, keeping his voice soft.

"No, sorry," Ginny mumbled back. It was one of those spells that she had always meant to learn, but other offensive spells had seemed more important. She made a mental note to rectify that when she got back to the castle and shifted, wincing as the corner of a book dug into her hip. The position she was in wasn't exactly comfortable, as she was jammed into the corner where two bookcases met. For some reason, she was still holding on to those damn books that Harry had shoved into her hands, but now trying to see the titles had totally lost her interest. Harry was down on one knee beside her, and their bodies were pretty so close that she could actually feel him shaking. Whether it was from nerves or the desire to go out and face the Death Eaters, she wasn't sure.

Footsteps coming in their direction caused both of them to tense. Harry's wand whipped up, but before he could cast a spell, he recognized Hermione and Malfoy, both of whom had their wands out. His eyes widened in disbelief, and he looked at Hermione like she had lost her mind as the older girl forcibly yanked Malfoy into the aisle and pulled him down beside Harry and Ginny. Hermione flashed Harry a warning look that dared him to say anything while they were under attack. A frown crossed Harry's face, and he shot Malfoy a glare, causing the blond to reciprocate, but both of them remained silent. The four teens huddled together and listened to the Death Eaters walking around the shop, openly swearing and setting things on fire at every turn.

"What should we do?" Hermione asked softly, cupping a hand over her mouth. There was smoke in the shop, and while they were temporarily spared because it was rising towards the ceiling, it would be a big problem all too soon. "I know the Disillusionment Charm, but it's too dangerous to try to sneak by them even if we use that. If one of them caught sight of us..." She trailed off, the meaning of her words clear. Perfect Disillusionment Charms, ones that would make

a person invisible and not just blend into the surroundings, required a lot of power to cast, and none of them had that much to spare.

"I could distract them," said Harry, thinking it over. "You and Ginny could try to escape – "

"You're not going out there," Ginny hissed, more sharply than she'd intended. She had never released his arm, but now she tightened her grip to re-affirm her words. "You don't know how many of them there are, and they've got tons of back-up right outside. They could kill you or worse, kidnap you and take you to Voldemort."

"But..." Frustration flashed in his eyes and he gritted his teeth. There was nothing that killed Harry more than when he couldn't be a part of whatever battle was going on. Listening to the Death Eaters and knowing that they were so close when he couldn't do anything about it was pure torture.

"Listen!" Malfoy only spoke the one word, but it was enough to silence all of them. Ginny tilted her head, listening hard, and could just barely make out the sound of the Death Eaters yelling in frustrating and annoyance. Familiar voices began shouting curses, and she heard the Death Eaters in the shop swearing about their fun being over with. Relief made her dizzy, and if she hadn't been clutching Harry's arm, she might've toppled over. Either the Aurors, or members of the Order of the Phoenix, or both, had arrived, and were fighting back.

"Thank Merlin," breathed Hermione. Seconds later, she burst into a flurry of harsh, ragged coughs. Three sets of eyes widened, and then Malfoy leaned over Hermione, clasping his free hand over her mouth. Hermione's body continued to shake with the force her coughing, but at least the sound was more muffled than it had been.

"Did you hear that?" It was the male, and he was much closer than before. Harry shrank back, unintentionally pinning Ginny against the wall. "Oi, Yonin, I could have sworn that I heard something back there. I don't think that old bastard was the only one here. I wonder if there are some little Hogwarts students running around?" Footsteps began to walk in their direction. Everyone tensed.

A figure rounded the corner. Ginny had just enough time to make out a dark cloak and a white mask before Malfoy's wand snapped up

and he mouthed a spell. The jet of blue light leapt from the end of his wand, and the man went down into a heap before he had a chance to understand what he was looking at. Malfoy released Hermione and leaned forward, grabbing the man's wand. With one quick motion, he snapped it in two and then tossed the jagged pieces down beside the body. Even if the man awoke, he would be unable to attack them. In spite of the gravity of the situation, Ginny couldn't help being amused at the sight of a look of grudging respect on Harry's face as Malfoy returned to his position beside Hermione.

"Simmons! We're getting the summons to retreat!" yelled the woman. "Come on, you wanker, let's get out of here!"

The familiar crack of disapparition made all four of them slump in relief, but they didn't have much time to relax. Smoke was rapidly filling the small shop, and Ginny could feel her body beginning to ache as she fought to inhale clean air. Harry stood up swiftly, pulling her up beside him. Without speaking, he motioned for Ginny to help the coughing Hermione out of the shop, and then pointed at Malfoy before gesturing to the unconscious man. Face set in a grimace, Malfoy nodded and leaned down, helping Harry out by grabbing the man's legs. Ginny took Hermione's hand and stepped forward, making sure that no one was in sight, before she started down the aisles. Their journey to the door caused them to pass by more than one roaring fire that was greedily consuming every book it came across. Hermione gave a low moan at the sight, but knew better than to think that the books could be saved.

Nearer to the exit, they came across the shopkeeper's body. His eyes were closed and he was just lying there on the floor, arms sprawled amongst a pile of books. Ginny knelt beside him and pressed her fingers to the side of his neck to feel for a pulse. Hannah had shown her that once. Much to her dismay, she felt nothing, not even when she placed a hand on his chest to chest for movement. There were no markings on his body and he looked oddly at peace, so she suspected that he had probably died from the killing curse, likely before he knew that there was even someone in the shop with him. Shaking her head, she rose to her feet, took hold of Hermione again, and shoved the door to the shop open.

Cool, sweet blessed air slapped her in the face as they emerged from the burning shop. Harry and Malfoy stumbled out just in time. The extra air flooding into the shop caused the flames to virtually

explode into a firestorm that engulfed the path they'd just walked. Ginny let go of the door in a hurry as the two boys tossed the still unconscious man down on the ground. All four of them backed away as Tomes & Scrolls began to burn in earnest. No one would be able to save the store now; even the most potent water spells in the world wouldn't have been able to help. It was too far gone. A thought struck her and she glanced down, realizing that she was still holding onto the books that Harry had given her. They were the only relics of the once beautiful and prosperous shop.

"Harry! Hermione!" a female voice made them all jump. Ginny turned to see Tonks and Remus Lupin rushing towards them. Remus stopped a fair distance from Harry, breathing heavily, and looked the teen over with a worried expression. He gradually relaxed when he saw that Harry was in one piece.

"I'm fine," said Harry, looking uncomfortable with the level of scrutiny. "Hermione's not. We were in the shop when the Death Eaters were setting it on fire, and she inhaled some of the smoke. She can't stop coughing."

Tonks immediately wrapped an arm around Hermione's shoulders and helped to support the younger girl. "Poor thing. Come on, Hermione. Professor Dumbledore has given us emergency portkeys that will take us straight to the Hospital Wing. I'll take you there right now. Madame Pomfrey will be able to fix you up in no time, okay?"

"Thanks Tonks," Hermione said raggedly, giving a pained smile. Tonks winked at her and then touched something that was hanging around her neck. She and Hermione vanished instantly.

"You sure you're okay?" Remus demanded, staring at Harry. "What were you doing in there?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "It's a book shop, Remus. Or at least, it was. What do you think I was in there for?"

Remus colored, looking somewhat uncomfortable. Ginny clutched the books to her chest and moved off to the side to give them some privacy. She was surprised when Malfoy joined her and shot the blond a quick, subtle glance. He was gazing off into the distance and frowning deeply. Like her, he was also clutching some books in his arms, though whether he had just forgotten he had them or had

picked them up on purpose, she didn't know. It was tempting to ask, but not even she had that much courage, even if Malfoy had knocked out that Death Eater and helped them to get out of the shop. Instead, she turned her attention to the village.

On the whole, Hogsmeade didn't look too badly off. Many of the shops were burning, most of them were missing doors and windows, and a few had been blown completely to bits, with only rubble left to attest to where they had once stood. It seemed that the main point of the attack had been to cause as much panic and destruction as possible. Wounded witches and wizards were now being seen to by Medi wizards and Healers from St. Mungos. All of the Hogwarts students were gone – most likely, the vast majority of them had taken off for the castle at the first sign of the attack, and those that had remained behind would have been taken up to safety by Order members or Aurors. Speaking of Aurors, she could see the familiar, purple-robed figures helping to put out fires or interviewing witnesses. A couple of them hurried over to the unconscious man in front of the shop and began putting him in custody.

Harry stepped up next to Ginny, his expression tight. "Let's go," he said shortly, ignoring the fact that Remus was still staring after him like a kicked puppy.

Biting back her instinctive questions, she turned to follow. A hand fell on her shoulder and she glanced back. Malfoy wordlessly held out the books he'd been clutching and pressed them into her hands. Wondering why he was handing them over, Ginny shot them a quick look and realized that they were all books on dark curses and the ministry... exactly what Hermione had been looking for. Her eyes widened, and she took them from him eagerly. He stepped back as soon as she was holding them, like he was afraid that she might try to touch him. Normally that would have annoyed her, but for some reason, this time it didn't.

"Thanks," she said, so quietly that only he would hear. Then she ran after Harry, not stopping to see whether Malfoy would accept the sentiments or not.

The walk back to Hogwarts was a silent one. Harry was tense, and one look at the expression on his face told her that it was better to remain silent. He was itching to blow up at someone, and she had no interest in being a target. She clutched the stack of books to her

chest and fell into step beside him without saying a word, mourning the fact that their happy day had turned into such a nightmare. Not only had they not had the chance to visit Honeydukes, Zonko's, or The Three Broomsticks, but she hadn't had the opportunity to search for something with which she and Harry could communicate at night... and it was extremely likely that any future Hogsmeade visits were going to be cancelled because it was getting to be too dangerous.

Ginny pouted and tightened her grip on the books. This sucked! Just when she thought she was finally getting closer to Harry, the Death Eaters had to intervene and screw everything up. Not only that, but the cancellation of Hogsmeade visits meant that the whole school would be even worse than normal if they couldn't get rid of some pent-up energy. Bored students were a disaster waiting to happen. The thought of even more gossip and rumours flying around was enough to put her into just as bad of a mood as Harry. Any students who were lingering around the entryway when the two of them stormed in got out of the way quickly.

"Mr Potter! Miss Ginevra!" Professor McGonagall's stern voice stopped them before they reached the staircase. Harry gave an irritated sigh and reluctantly turned to face the woman. Ginny only just resisted jumping in surprise when his hand came up to rest on her shoulder. "Auror Tonks explained to me what happened. I must insist that the two of you report to the Hospital Wing so that Madame Pomfrey can check you over."

"I'm fine," Harry said, not moving. The weight of his hand kept Ginny in her place as well. "We both are."

"That's not your decision to make, Potter. Hospital Wing now," the professor ordered. "I'd rather not give you a detention or take points away, but if that's what it comes to..."

"Oh, let's just go," Ginny said, exasperated. She was completely fed up and wanted nothing more than to bury herself under the covers with a container of Honeydukes finest chocolate. "Come on, Harry. It will be a quick trip."

Apparently realizing that there was no way around it, Harry sighed and headed back across the floor with Ginny at his side. They passed Professor McGonagall, who was no longer paying attention

to them now that she had gotten their agreement, and headed up the opposite staircase. Harry's footsteps grew slower the closer they got to the Wing, and because his hand was still on her shoulder, she was forced to slow down as well. She flashed him a concerned look, her previous ire dying away, as they finally reached the door and she pushed it open. The acrid scent of smoke rushed out to meet them and she forgot all about worrying over Harry when she got a good look at what was going on inside the Hospital Wing.

Nearly every bed was occupied with either injured students or Order members, with wounds ranging from mild to severe burns, to cuts, scrapes and bruises, to more serious gashes and curses. Ginny stared in a kind of horrified fascination, allowing Harry to gently steer her through the room. She saw one third-year Ravenclaw who was missing three fingers on his left hand, a fifth-year Slytherin who was bleeding heavily from a deep cut on her stomach, and Lavender Brown unconscious on a bed before the two of them were ushered into a curtained-off space by the Healer who had been assigned to help Madame Pomfrey with Ron.

"Hermione!" Harry exclaimed, snapping Ginny out of her shock. He lurched forward, his eyes widening at the sight of his best friend. Hermione opened her eyes and managed to smile, but to say that she looked awful was an understatement. Her face was ashen, nearly the same color as the white sheets she was lying on, and her clothing was covered in ashes and soot. She opened her mouth to speak but was cut off when a series of wracking coughs began to shake her whole body.

"S-sor-rry," she stuttered between gasps for breath, cupping her hands over her mouth. "H-heal-lers a-are b-bus-ee."

"You sound awful," Ginny said, going quickly to the other side of the bed and placing the books down on a chair. She spotted a pitcher of water and hastily poured a glass for the older girl. "Here, drink this. It will help soothe your throat."

Once the coughing fit had eased, Hermione took the glass with a grateful smile and sipped from it quickly. "It's not too bad," she said hoarsely, not even sounding like herself. "I just can't stop coughing."

"No one has seen to you yet?" asked Harry, looking upset. "What if you're dying?"

Hermione chuckled and then froze, one hand flying nervously to her chest. When she didn't burst into coughs, she relaxed. "Harry, I'm not dying, I promise you. It's common for people who have inhaled too much smoke to have trouble breathing. Madame Pomfrey cast a status spell on me as soon as Tonks and I arrived. If anything happened, she would be over here in a flash, but right now she has more important cases to worry about." She shivered. "I've already seen a bunch of students and Order members being taken to St. Mungos, and believe me, they were in need of a lot more help than I am."

Harry paled slightly and sat down hard on the edge of the bed, looking regretful. It wasn't hard to tell what was going through his mind. "I should have done something," he began.

"There was nothing you could have done," Ginny told him gently, wishing that she could remove that look of utter self-loathing from his eyes. Even as she spoke the words, she knew that Harry wouldn't believe her. He took every death on his shoulders as surely as though he had been the one to hold the wand that had cast the spells. "You did the best possible thing by making sure that you stayed out of the fight and got out of there safely. Who knows what might have happened to me and Hermione if you hadn't been there?"

"I know damn well you two aren't exactly damsels in distress," he retorted sharply, though she was relieved to note that his expression had lightened a little. "I'm sure you would have been fine, particularly since Malfoy was there."

Hermione's eyes widened slightly in surprise. "Harry?"

"Well, he did seem like he was trying to help," the boy muttered, looking embarrassed. "He's still a prick, and I wouldn't trust the bastard further than I could throw him, but..." He trailed off and shrugged one shoulder.

"That reminds me," said Ginny, wanting to give Harry a chance to change the subject. She picked up the two books that Malfoy had given her and set them on the corner of Hermione's bed. "Malfoy gave me these to give to you, Hermione. He must have picked them up and taken them with him out of the shop. And Harry, here,

these ones are yours. You'll have to send some money to whoever takes over Tomes & Scrolls. I held onto them without thinking." As she handed them over, she deliberately kept her eyes facing forward so that she wouldn't see the titles of the bottom two books. Harry's jaw tightened and he sighed, visibly curling in on himself as he took and held the books on his lap.

"Oh!" Looking happier than Ginny had seen her since they walked in, Hermione reached for the books from Malfoy with eager fingers and either didn't notice or ignored the brief exchange between Harry and Ginny. She flipped one open and began perusing it with a fascinated look. "I've never even heard of these before, but maybe they'll have information - " Her voice was cut off abruptly when she doubled over and began coughing hard, her whole body shaking with the force of it. When she didn't stop within a minute or two, Ginny stood up and hovered over her, fear visible in her face. Hermione began to gasp for breath and gag as small bits of black slime flew from her mouth and covered her hands.

"Madame Pomfrey!" Harry was just starting to jump to his feet when the curtains blew back and the woman rushed in, her face lined with fatigue. She wasted no time in hurrying over to Hermione and casting a spell on the girl's chest. They watched anxiously as a deep, soothing blue color washed over Hermione's body and sank beneath her skin. Almost immediately, Hermione's furious coughing slowed, and she fell back against the pillows, her breathing weak and unsteady.

"I apologize for making you wait. Miss Granger," Pomfrey said, briskly reaching into the pocket of her white robes. She pulled out a vial filled with an orange potion and murmured something. The vial transformed into a mask-like object that had the potion in a clear container attached to the front. "Put this over your face. You need to breathe in the potion instead of drinking it. That's the only way to dissolve the phlegm in your chest." Her lips crooked into half a smile. "Unless you'd prefer to do it the muggle way by coughing all of it up. It's most unpleasant, I assure you."

"No thanks," Hermione rasped, reaching for the mask. When she placed it over her mouth and nose, the mask shimmered and instantly formed a tight seal to her face so that it wouldn't fall off. She took a deep breath, inhaling some of the orange potion, and closed her eyes. Her face was pale.

"Will she be alright?" Ginny asked anxiously.

"Yes, she'll be fine in a few hours. I expect one dose will do it, but I'll keep her here overnight to make sure that it does the job." With a quick wave of her wand, she cast a couple of spells over Hermione's body, then nodded with approval. "That potion will help to repair the damage done to her lungs by the smoke, and she'll be feeling in top shape by tomorrow morning. Now, as for the two of you..." She turned towards Harry, who backed away. "No use in running, Mr Potter. I only need to do a simple scan to make sure that neither of you were injured. Smoke inhalation and fire are nothing to play with. Do hold still."

She repeated the same scan over Harry that she'd done to Hermione. It resulted in a gentle violet light that made the woman smile. Harry breathed a sigh of relief as she turned on Ginny and performed the same spell. For the most part, it came out a deep blue. The only part that shone black was a section on Ginny's right arm. Madame Pomfrey examined it quickly and discovered that there was a small but nasty-looking burn on the back of her right arm, a few inches above her wrist. Both Harry and Hermione frowned at the sight, but Madame Pomfrey didn't appear to be too concerned.

"That's common when you're dealing with this sort of situation, and you're fortunate that it wasn't anything more serious," she said. "But stay here, Ginny. I have a cream that I'll give you to rub on for the pain and to make sure that it doesn't become infected."

"Yes, Madame," Ginny said, looking at the burn with some fascination. She didn't remember having received it, though it had obviously happened in the shop. It didn't hurt, but she knew from experience that it would probably throb like hell later. What little experience that she'd had in the kitchen with Molly Weasley had proven that much.

"I didn't know you were hurt," said Harry.

"You and me both. I suppose I was too caught up in trying to get out of there to notice," she answered, brushing her fingers over the reddened skin. Pain flared up her arm and she flinched. Okay, that

had been stupid. "Don't worry. It's just a small burn. Madame Pomfrey will have it healed up in no time."

"Ginny!" Pomfrey called from somewhere outside the curtain.

"I think you're being summoned," Hermione said. Her voice sounded muffled and distant, but she was easy enough to understand. "Harry, you stay here."

Harry grimaced, and Ginny shot them both curious looks as she stood up slowly. It had hit her quite suddenly, but she felt completely exhausted, like there were heavy weights attached to her limbs. A bed in the Hospital Wing had never looked as tempting as it did right then. But Harry and Hermione were both watching her closely, so she pasted a fake smile on as she turned and pushed the curtain open, slipping out. The room had emptied out considerably, as most of the more seriously injured students had already been moved to St. Mungos. That Healer was still moving around the room with a tray of Potions, and Madame Pomfrey was standing by her office, rummaging through a cupboard. Ginny headed over to her, ready to get some of the cream so that she could go collapse somewhere.

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As soon as Ginny was gone, Hermione switched her attention to Harry and narrowed her eyes. After so many years of being close friends, it was easy for her to interpret what he was feeling. Guilt. Self-loathing. Anger. Fear. His green eyes were stormy and miserable. She softened and, without thinking, took a deep breath of the potion. It didn't taste too badly in vapour form, but it left a gritty feeling at the back of her throat that was annoying when she tried to talk. Not that it really mattered – experience had taught her that Harry would feel the same way no matter what she said – but she had to try anyway.

"Harry," she said softly. "Ginny's right. It's not your fault. You made the best decision."

"People died, Hermione," he said, sounding upset. "The Death Eaters were treating the town like it was some sort of... of toy. I heard them laughing while people were screaming in pain, and I didn't do anything to stop them."

"It wasn't your responsibility," she answered patiently. "Harry, you are just one person. Regardless of what the prophecy says, you don't have to fight this battle alone." He went to open his mouth and she pushed on hastily before he could speak. "I mean it. Yes, you might be the one who has to deal with Voldemort, but the prophecy said nothing about you having to deal with the Death Eaters, and you know it. There's no reason that you have to take the weight of the world on your shoulders. Let the rest of us support you, and part of that means keeping you safe until you're ready to face Voldemort. So please, stop doing this to yourself. It kills me to watch you torture yourself like this."

His shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I just can't help it. I keep thinking that I should be able to do something. I should stop this before it goes any further and any more people die."

Hermione ached for him. She leaned forward and placed her hand on top of his, wishing that she could do more to offer him comfort. "No one can stop this war single-handedly, Harry, especially not a sixteen-year-old boy. Prophecy or no prophecy. We're here to help you. You're not alone in this, and you never will be. Neither Ginny nor I would ever let that happen, and you know it."

He stilled at the mention of the fiery redhead, and then he moved his hand, turning it over so that he could intertwine their fingers. "I never should have told you about the prophecy. You're the only one I know who could find a way to make it seem as though it proves I don't have to do this alone."

She laughed, relieved that there was a small smile playing around his lips. "It's just part of my charm," she joked, absently rubbing her chest. With every breath she took through the little mask apparatus, she could feel the painful grip on her chest that had made her cough so hard loosening. "Seriously, Harry. Try to understand that by staying with us, you made the best choice that you could have. You won't be able to help any of us if you lose your life in a fight with a Death Eater. I know you know I'm right."

"That doesn't mean I have to admit it," he pointed out, shifting the books on his lap. Hermione's gaze fell to them. They were sitting in such a way that she couldn't make out the titles, and she couldn't help the intense surge of curiosity that blazed through her. Harry saw the look on her face and smirked. "Something wrong, 'Mione?"

"Don't call me that," she said automatically. "What are you up to, Harry Potter?"

"Nothing dangerous, I promise," he replied, standing up and letting go of her hand. She was surprised when he leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. "Stay safe, okay, Hermione? I don't know what I would do if anything ever happened to you."

Unexpectedly, her eyes filled with tears, but she tried to hide it. "Don't worry. Nothing much could happen to me when I'm in here," she said, waving a hand to indicate the Hospital Wing. "Unless you count being smothered to death by Madame Pomfrey. I can't believe I'm back here already. Usually you're the one who spends so much time in here that you've got a private bed."

"I guess it was time for a change," Harry answered. Though the comment had been made lightly, there was a thoughtful light in his eyes as he turned to leave that made her nervous. Just what kind of a change was he looking for?

Please review!

A/N: Such nice reviews, I really love reading each and every one. A bunch of people are asking me why Draco seems so nice, and about whether I'm planning a Draco/Hermione pairing. To the first, you'll find out eventually. As to the second, I'm not sure. It could go three different ways at this point and I still haven't decided which way I prefer. You're free to give me ideas in reviews as to who you'd like Hermione to be paired with, but I'm not making promises. The story will decide for itself. In the meantime, please enjoy the beginning of some good old-fashioned H/G goodness.

Note: I apologize to anyone who received two notifications about this story. For some reason, either the site or my internet screwed up when I was uploading this chapter and another one of my stories, and the chapters refused to show. I had to re-upload. Here's hoping it works this time.

Ginny was resting on her bed, flipping lazily through the copy of The Quibbler that Luna had given her, when the tapping at the window came. Harper Vance climbed off of her bed and walked over the window with a happy expression, clearly expecting something from her latest boyfriend. Her eyes widened and she gasped when she saw the snowy owl that was waiting to be let in. Out of everyone in the castle, Harry Potter was one of the few who owned a white owl. She opened it excitedly, hoping that the letter attached would be for her, even though she had never spoken to Harry before. Hedwig hooted disdainfully when she reached for the letter and, with a massive flap of her wings, soared into the room and straight over to Ginny. The redhead jumped when she felt the claws gently gripping her knees and looked up at Hedwig curiously.

"Is that for me?" she asked, smiling when Hedwig stuck her leg out with another impatient hoot. "From Harry? Thank you, Hedwig." Carefully, she un-tied the parchment and set it on her bed. She grabbed her bag, which had been tossed on the floor beside her bed, and rummaged through it until she came up with half a gingerbread cookie that had been leftover from lunch the day before. Hedwig made an approving sound as she broke the cookie into tiny pieces and scattered them across the bedspread. As the owl dipped her head to eat, Ginny opened the envelope and unrolled the parchment inside.

As expected, it was from Harry. The note was short and to the point, asking her to come to the Room of Requirement at just past five.

She glanced at the clock on their wall and saw that it was nearly time. Making sure that she didn't disrupt Hedwig, she rolled off of her bed and knelt to look underneath. Astoria had never gotten around to giving her the Occlumency books, but Ginny had a few books of her own that she thought might go a long way towards helping Harry. It wasn't exactly Occlumency, but it would give him something to start with. She carefully sorted through them until she'd found the very basic ones. By that time, Hedwig had finished, and with one last affectionate nip to Ginny's fingers, the owl flew out the windows. Ginny cast privacy charms around her bed - it had become a necessary thing, when she lived with roommates who weren't afraid to snoop - and walked out the door.

For once, no one in the common room gave her a second look as she headed through. Most of the students were either recuperating from the attack or trying to find out the sordid details. It seemed that a few of the students had actually participated in the fight, most notably Neville Longbottom, Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, Cho Chang, and Justin Finch-Fletchley. They'd succeeded in holding off a few of the Death Eaters until the Aurors came to help, and that made them all something of a hero. Poor Neville looked mortified by the attention, but Seamus and Dean were hamming it up, telling stories that were most assuredly exaggerated and acting out the fight for the fascinated lower years. Ginny smiled to herself as she slipped out the doors and began the trip to the Room of Requirement. It was partly Harry's tutoring that had enabled them to defend themselves, but no one would remember or say anything.

That made her think of the new defence teacher and his desire to start the club back up. She thought it was a good idea, though she wasn't so sure about helping him; she had been telling him the truth when she said that she hadn't really done too much to help Harry and Hermione the year before. She found herself wondering if Professor Astrum had spoken to either of them about it, since they hadn't mentioned it. Perhaps he had and he hadn't told them that he had also asked Ginny to be a part of it? It wasn't so long ago that Ginny had been a complete outsider to the Golden Trio, stuck looking in. Even now that things had changed a bit, there were still many secrets that existed solely between Harry and Hermione. It made for a somewhat lonely experience when she was hanging around with them, and she just hoped that the club wouldn't have to be one of them.

Harry was waiting for her by the entrance to the room when she got to the seventh floor. He smiled a greeting, and she noticed that he was carrying two packages in his arms as he turned and began pacing back and forth in front of the wall. The door appeared and he opened it, revealing a room similar to what Hermione had created before. There was a roaring fireplace, but only two comfortable chairs this time that faced each other, with a small coffee table in between them. Much to her surprise, there was already a plate of sandwiches and two goblets along with a pitcher of pumpkin juice waiting for them. Ginny set her books down and walked over to investigate. Sure enough, the food and drink were real.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, watching her.

"I didn't think that the Room could create food or drink," she said thoughtfully. "Did you wish for it?"

"I'm hungry," he admitted. "Mostly I wanted a private spot where the two of us could talk and work and yes, I guess, eat. Maybe the Room is connected to the kitchens and summoned food from the elves." He shrugged. "I don't care. I'm starving."

Ginny laughed and sat down on one of the chairs. She picked up a sandwich as Harry sat down across from her and bit into it. The taste of bacon, tomato, and cheese was delicious, and she realized that she hadn't eaten anything all day. "I brought some books along," she said, nodding in the direction of the table as she quickly polished off her sandwich. "Harry, I'm afraid Astoria and I mislead you a little."

"What do you mean?" He shot her a curious look as he poured the two goblets full of juice and set the pitcher down on the table. "You mean, you don't know Occlumency?"

"Well, yes," Ginny admitted. Her heart was pounding hard, and her hands shook a little as she picked up her goblet. It was always hard to talk about the things that she and Astoria did. They were so very private. "Occlumency is the act of pushing certain memories behind others, so that people only see what you want them to see. I was telling you the truth when I said that it was good protection against possession, but what I found was better yet." She absently swirled the juice around and looked up at him. "What Astoria and I have been practicing... what we can do... it works a little differently. It's

more difficult, a nearly constant drain, and relies more on the strength of your own personal magic. It also requires years of practice to be any good at it. That's probably why Dumbledore never suggested that you try to learn."

He tilted his head, curious. "I certainly haven't had any luck with Occlumency," he pointed out. "Do you think it could it help me against Voldemort?"

"I don't know. Your link is different from anything I've ever heard about," she admitted. She couldn't see why the shields wouldn't work, but she didn't want to get his hopes up. "But it certainly couldn't hurt to try. It does work to block out Legilimency, if that's what you're asking. I was able to protect myself from Dumbledore."

"Then I'm interested in learning," Harry said firmly. "The only people available to teach me Occlumency are Snape and Dumbledore. I don't trust Snape. There's just too much between us for him to be able to teach me anything. The lessons I was having with him last year were a disaster." Something flickered in his eyes, and he looked away. "And I'm not sure I trust Dumbledore anymore, either. I think he sent me this."

"What is it?" she asked, looking intently at the package he had held out to her.

"Last year, Sirius gave me a two-way mirror," he said reluctantly. "He told me to use it if I ever needed to contact him, but I forgot all about it. I didn't want to be the one who... who called him away from Grimmauld Place." Pain flashed through his eyes and he took a deep breath. "Besides, I've been wary of using magical things ever since... well... you know." He glanced up at her and she repressed a shiver. Yes, she did. "After he died, I was so angry that I broke it. It's been at the bottom of my trunk ever since, and I never thought about it again. Then, when I got back to my dorm this morning, this package was waiting on my bed. I opened it up and saw that it was the mirror that Sirius must have kept." His hands worked to unwrap the package, and then he handed the contents to her. Ginny ran her fingers over the smooth, cold surface as she accepted it from him. "I don't know how he ended up with it, but I can't think of who else would have sent it to me."

"But... I don't understand why Dumbledore would have given it to you," Ginny said, bewildered. "If yours is broken..."

"I thought it could be repaired," he explained. "Then we'd have a way to contact each other."

"Oh." The light dawned, and Ginny looked down at the small mirror with new respect. "But... this was a way for you to keep in contact with Sirius. Are you sure you want to give it to me, Harry? We could look for something else."

"It doesn't do me any good to keep both of them," Harry said quietly, unwrapping the second bundle and revealing the mess of shards in his lap. There was also a small silver square, which he picked up and tapped against his knee. "I used a Summoning Charm on them, so I think I've got all the pieces here. I thought we could cast a Mending Charm together. I don't know whether the connection's been affected, but we could give it a shot."

"Sure. Like you said, it's worth a try." Ginny pulled her wand out and stood up, stepping around the coffee table to lean down beside him. Harry tensed slightly as he shifted in her direction, giving her access to the shards.

"Ready?" he asked, sounding tense. "One... two..."

"Reparo!"

For a moment, nothing happened. Then all of the shards leapt back into the silver square that he was holding formed and formed a whole, the cracks disappearing to leave the mirror smooth. Harry set his wand down and touched the surface, examining the mirror briefly for any cracks. His emerald eyes were distant, like his mind was elsewhere. Ginny backed off and sat on her chair, watching him, wondering what he was thinking about. The night he'd broken it? Sirius? All of the above? The look on his face... it was like he was trying and failing to find something in his reflection. Her heart broke for him, and at that moment, she would have given anything to have the ability to bring Sirius Black back to life.

"Harry?" she said softly, leaning forward slightly. "Do you want to test the mirror out?"

He jumped and blinked, coming back to himself with a start. "I – alright, sure. Sirius told me that I had to look into it and say his name. It was keyed to him and my dad, so..." Holding the mirror close to his face, he said, "Sirius Black!"

She glanced down at the mirror on her lap with an expectant look on her face. Nothing happened. "Do you think that connection is broken?" she asked after a moment.

"Maybe..." he muttered. "Just let me – Padfoot!" He spoke the word sharply. Ginny gasped as the mirror in her lap grew warm to the point of where it was just a shade shy of being painful.

"You did it!" she exclaimed, surprised, and picked up the mirror. Her fingers tingled with pain. "How do I answer?"

"Sirius didn't really explain that part," Harry said thoughtfully. "But try 'Prongs'."

"Prongs," Ginny repeated obediently, staring into the depths of the mirror. Slowly, her reflection faded away to reveal a close-up of emerald green eyes and she laughed with delight. "It works! How marvellous. I should have guessed that Sirius would use their Marauders names instead of their real ones. How do you cancel it?"

"How else? Mischief Managed," he recited, holding the mirror up. Instantly, the charm ended, leaving both of them staring at their own reflections. Harry sat back in chair and sighed before he glanced at her. "Will this do, you think? You'll have to keep it close when you go to bed, but..."

"It's perfect, Harry. Thank you," she said quietly, knowing that there was no way she could explain how much it meant to her. Not only had he given her something that was very precious, he was making an effort to keep his promise. Sensing that he had grown awkward and that he'd probably like a change of subject, she spoke cautiously. "Would you like to start on the lessons now?"

"Yes please," Harry said eagerly, setting the mirror down on the table. He took the book that she handed to him and glanced at it.

"You can read that tonight before you go to bed," she explained. "It's important to begin to learn how to meditate first. Your mind has to be

organized before you can start work on your magic. It will also probably help you sleep better at night. Actually, now that I think of it, it will probably seem familiar to you, since Occlumency starts in a similar way." She watched him flip through the pages and smiled. "It might seem hard, but just go with it, alright?"

"I will. Is this how you began?" He continued to look through the book and was pleased to see that it offered more detail on what to do than just "clear your mind". If he had to hear that one more time, he might punch someone.

"Yes. Astoria and I learned it together." She purposely omitted any mention of Hannah and Luna. That was their private business and Harry didn't have to know. "Meditation was important for many of the things that we wanted to do together. It's the focal point for a lot of magic. Even before a duel, it's best if you meditate for a moment if you have the time. It can really help you focus."

"I'll remember that the next time I face Voldemort," he said dryly, and she grinned.

The two of them fell into silence after that, both consumed by their own individual books. Ginny was reading a book about more advanced partner magic - she and Astoria were thinking about moving onto the next step, which was maintaining a connection for longer periods of times - when she glanced up and saw that Harry had fallen asleep. She had to smile. He looked so cute when he was sleeping, like a little boy. It wasn't surprising that he was tired, considering the events of the day. With a wince, she stood up and twisted. Her back cracked and she sighed, relishing the feeling as her muscles relaxed, as she pondered her new problem. How was she going to get Harry back to Gryffindor Tower without waking him up?

"I need a bed," she said out loud. Nothing appeared to happen, but when she turned around, there was indeed a large bed tucked into the far corner of the room. Ginny cast a lightening charm on Harry and then grabbed him around the shoulders, pulling his limp body up. Without the charm's help, she never would have managed to drag him across the room and into the bed, but magic was a wonderful thing. She was still panting by the time he was actually under the covers, and she thought that it might not be such a bad thing to sit

down for a moment herself. Famous last words. Within less than two minutes, she was out.

NIR

Harry woke slowly, forcing his tired eyes open, making himself leave the best night's sleep he had gotten in... forever. His body was begging for more of that wonderful, undisturbed sleep, but he had the strange feeling that more time had passed than he'd realized, and... wasn't there somewhere he was supposed to be? Frowning, he raised a hand to rub weakly at his eyes and then squinted, peering around the room, puzzled as to why there were no sounds of anyone else getting up for the day. At first, he didn't recognize where he was, and he made to sit up, alarmed at the thought that he was somewhere other than Gryffindor Tower. A heavy weight on his shoulder and a soft moan told him he wasn't alone.

Ginny. The sight of the ends of her auburn hair, just barely visible under the heavy covers, brought memories rushing back, and he remembered speaking with her in the Room of Requirement. He didn't remember leaving, and as he glanced around with more familiarity, he realized that was because they hadn't. Somehow, he'd ended up in the world's most comfortable bed, and Ginny was tucked in securely beside him. Harry looked back down at her as she sighed and scooted closer to him with an unintelligible murmur. Surprisingly, his movement hadn't woken her up, and he felt himself softening as he eased himself back down and let her continue to sleep.

The firelight danced against her hair, and he realized for the first time that there were threads of gold mixed in with the deep red. It was a good color for her. Even he could tell that much, and he knew next to nothing about that kind of thing. His left hand was resting on top of her hair, and he found himself gently stroking the long curls, enjoying the feeling of the silky tendrils underneath his fingers. Ginny seemed to like the feeling as well, for she gave another contented sigh and nuzzled her head against his shoulder. Harry grinned and took his eyes away from her, looking up at the ceiling.

Three months ago, if someone had suggested to him that he would one day be lying in bed with Ginny at his side, he would've called them crazy. He had never been that close to the girl, even though he had known her since he was eleven years old. Her crush had been a

big factor in keeping them apart. Well, that and the fact that Harry had been perfectly content with only Ron and Hermione as his best friends. When he was younger, he'd never had the opportunity to have any friends. Dudley had the tendency to drive away anyone who had expressed even the slightest bit of interest in befriending his cousin. So Ron and Hermione had been precious commodities to him, and he'd guarded what existed between the three of them carefully, particularly when he noticed that other people were actually envious of the friendship that existed between them. Foolishly, he had begun to believe that nothing would ever be able to drive them apart.

Until the Battle at the Department of Mysteries. Harry closed his eyes at the memories and sighed. Having had some experience with the way Ron could act, he hadn't thought much of it when his friend began picking fights earlier in the summer. Like most of the Order members, he'd dismissed it. Only Hermione had persisted with the notion that something was seriously wrong with Ron. By the end of the summer, Harry had to agree. Ron had developed an unhealthy obsession with Harry, and not in a good way. He had been so hurt that he hadn't wanted to understand what could make his best friend act in such a manner, and at the same time, it had made him a hell of a lot less inclined to ever trust anyone. So how had Ginny wormed her way in so easily?

There was just something about her that Harry didn't really understand. He liked being with her and had gradually come to realize that she was much more intelligent, interesting, and surprising than he could have guessed. It made him wish that he hadn't dismissed her in his earlier years just because she'd had such a voracious crush on him. No one would ever be able to fill the hole Ron had left in his life, but Ginny was beginning to carve out a new spot for herself. Much to his shock, he actually enjoyed spending time with her, and he was pleased that Hermione appeared to have been right. Her crush had disappeared and she looked at Harry like he was a friend. A good friend, judging by the fact that she had been willing to give up so much for him. With anyone else, except for possibly Hermione, Harry might have wondered if it had been just because he was the Boy-Who-Lived. But with Ginny, he didn't. He knew that she had done it for him, and that meant more than he could have ever put into words.

That brought him back to Ron, though. Could the damage to his red-haired friend be repaired? If it was, would their friendship ever be the same? Harry couldn't help the way he felt around Ron, like he always had to be on guard for the boy's next cutting comment or argument. Ron wasn't someone he could trust anymore, and he didn't even like the thought of him being around Hermione, even though it had been Harry who had helped them get together in the first place. How could he trust Ron? But then again, how could he not, since the situation wasn't really Ron's fault? There was just no good answer and he groaned, feeling exhausted even though he'd slept well. The urge to go back to sleep so that he didn't have to think about Ron was all too tempting.

Beside him, Ginny stirred, having been awakened by the sound of his groan. She opened her eyes slowly and blinked, looking somewhat confused. The thought flashed through his mind that she looked pretty cute, but it disappeared as soon as she focused on him. Her mouth dropped open. "Harry?" she squeaked, glancing quickly around the room. Understanding seemed to hit her must faster and she turned an interesting shade of pink that clashed with her hair. When she tried to sit up, his hand tightened just enough to keep her in place. "Oh god, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep beside you."

"It's okay," he said, and was surprised to realize that he wasn't just saying that. He meant it. Harry had never slept in the same bed as someone else, but it was actually rather comforting, and he could understand why people did. Her weight was solid against his side, and the warmth her body produced was reassuring. "I slept well. Didn't you?"

Ginny's eyes widened slightly, but she nodded and gave up, allowing her head to still rest against his shoulder. "Yes, I did. I guess I was more tired than I realized."

"So was I." Harry looked away and tucked his free hand behind his head, propping himself up a little. "I was just... thinking about Ron." The second the words were out of his mouth, he felt a little silly. She wouldn't want to hear about the brother who had treated her so badly. What was it about Ginny that made him want to open up to her about things that he usually never told anyone? It still amazed him to think that he had actually agreed to tell her about his nightmares whenever he woke up from one. Normally he did

everything possible to downplay them. But he had to admit that a large part of it was how Ginny reacted. Though she was sympathetic and concerned, she didn't fawn over him like Hermione did, and nor did she act like he was going to attack like Ron did sometimes.

"You were? What were you thinking?" she asked hesitantly. Her uncertainty made him relax further. It was good to know that she felt the same way he did. Like their friendship was still tentative, and they didn't know how far they could go before things would get awkward. He decided to be honest.

"Just... I hate that none of this is really his fault," Harry told her, shifting slightly. Belatedly, he noticed that his hand had never stopped the rhythmic stroking that seemed to be soothing for both of them. He kept it up while he spoke. "I mean, consciously, I know he didn't do or say those things because he wanted to. The brain, that curse, and then the Imperious... all of them combined to make a mockery of the person I call my friend. I know that. It's not his fault. But when I try to think about being friends with Ron... It makes me feel sick. I can't handle the thought of trying to trust him again."

She didn't say anything for a moment. Then she sighed. "I'm not sure I'm the best one to talk about this with, Harry. I can't feel anything positive towards Ron. Even if Hermione did find a cure... if she could reverse some of what happened... It wouldn't change anything between us."

Harry closed his eyes, feeling a wave of guilt that was almost sickening. "Ginny, I – "

"Oh, stop. Don't start feeling guilty on me now, Harry. It's not your fault. I chose to do it and I don't want you to feel badly about my choice, got it? Look, Ron was your friend for a long time, and you went through a lot together. I don't think you should give up on him if you don't want to. Things will never be the same between you, that's true. With the bonds between the families broken, you'll probably never be close again. But that doesn't mean that you couldn't at least be a little friendly towards each other if Hermione manages to fix him. And you know that's a big if. As it stands, Ron doesn't want anything to do with you, so you should stop worrying about it." Her voice was firm, accepting no protests.

"You're pretty bossy," he observed, amusement winning out over the guilt for the time being.

"Just one of the great things about being my friend," she said lightly. There was a touch of anxiety in her eyes, but it vanished when he smiled at her comment. His smile grew broader when he realized that he had the power to comfort her.

"I guess I'll have to get used to it, then," he said, and was rewarded with a brilliant smile. Both of them fell silent after that, but it didn't feel awkward. Actually, Harry found himself thinking that he could have easily lain there with her for several more hours, with no sounds but the soft crackling of the fire and their combined breathing. When Ginny spoke again, he was almost disappointed.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"I've got no idea," Harry replied. Frankly, he didn't really care.

"I wish I could see." Almost before the words were out of her mouth, a night table with a clock on top of it popped into existence. Curious in spite of himself, Harry tilted his head and saw that it was half past three on... Sunday afternoon? Ginny swore when she saw what time it was and hastily rolled off of the bed. Harry sat up and watched her hurry around, smoothing her hair back with her fingers and grabbing for her wand and books. He wasn't sure why she was panicking, and although he wouldn't have admitted it, he was sorry that he hadn't taken the chance to go back to sleep with her when he'd had it.

"What's wrong?" he asked finally.

"I was supposed to meet Professor Astrum at three," she explained, tucking her wand into her pocket. "I'm supposed to take some sort of quiz to see how advanced I am."

In an instant, Harry remembered why he'd felt that niggling sense of having forgotten something. "That's right. I agreed to drop by at half past four to see about starting up the D.A. again."

"You agreed?" Ginny paused and peered at him, a smile tugging at her lips. "I'd hoped you would."

He turned away, flushing. "He made it sound like a reasonable idea, and it's not as though I'd have to be the teacher this time. We wouldn't have to sneak around." There was no need to add that he wouldn't have liked being a part of Dumbledore's Army anymore, anyway – he suspected that she already knew.

"I'll see you in an hour, then," she said, her eyes soft. She granted him one last smile and then practically flew out the door.

Without Ginny, the room seemed strangely empty. Harry sighed and stood up, straightening his pants and smoothing his wrinkled shirt as the bed vanished behind him. His stomach growled and it occurred to him that his last meal had been eaten several hours ago. He could have called for Dobby and ordered more food, but he decided to go visit Hermione instead and see if she had been freed from the clutches of Madame Pomfrey. Quickly, he collected the books that Ginny had brought for him and picked up his mirror. He couldn't help noticing that Ginny's mirror was gone, and realized that she must have remembered to take it with her. The thought made him oddly cheerful as he left the Room and headed for the Hospital Wing.

Please review!

A/N: Thank you so much for the reviews. They make me happy. I'm sorry if the pace of the story seems a little slow. I'm trying to keep a healthy balance between information and action, but if I'm not doing that, then please let me know? Right now I'm setting some groundwork for important things that will happen later on, so try to pay attention! Seriously, there are some big hints of things to come in this chapter. Enjoy!

Notice: To give you advance warning, I received a job offer today. I don't start until January 9th, but that means I won't have my days empty to write at my leisure (I miss it already). I'm going to do my best to keep up with one chapter a week, though.

By the time she made it to Professor Astrum's office, Ginny was nearly an hour late. She paused just outside the man's door and took a slow, deep breath to help center herself before taking a moment to smooth down her hair and straighten out her clothing. The t-shirt and jeans that she was wearing were both badly wrinkled from having been slept in, but she definitely didn't have the time to go back to Gryffindor Tower and change. It was unfortunate, because she could have used a couple of minutes to gather her thoughts. Just when she thought she was under control, she would remember that she had spent the night in the same bed as Harry Potter and woken up to find his arm around her as he stroked her hair, and her heart would give a strange little flip that made her feel quite breathless.

"Alright, Ginny, it's time to let it go," she mumbled, pressing the backs of her hands against her flushed cheeks. There was no time to think about Harry. After one last deep breath, she reached up and knocked on the door before pushing it open and poking her head in. Chance Astrum was seated behind his desk, his feet up on top of it, a cup of tea in his hands. He smiled broadly when he saw her and quickly put his feet down on the floor as he leaned forward.

"Ah, good afternoon, Ginny," he greeted, eyes twinkling. "I was beginning to wonder if you had forgotten our meeting in lieu of yesterday's excitement. I'd heard you were at Hogsmeade. You weren't hurt, were you?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry. I just overslept," Ginny said apologetically, easing her way into the room. She sat down on the chair across from him

and folded her hands in her lap. "I hope I'm not too late to take the test?"

"Of course not. Don't worry about it. After yesterday, I had thought that maybe I should suggest we re-schedule," he said, looking somewhat concerned. He poured her some tea and slid the cup across the desk towards her. "Minerva told me that you were caught in one of the shops by some Death Eaters. If you're feeling too upset or stressed to take the quiz today, it's not a big deal to postpone it until tomorrow. I'd like you to take it when you're feeling up to it."

"I feel fine," she replied, taking the cup gratefully. The soothing scent of the tea calmed her as she took a careful sip and mentally reviewed her status just to be certain that she was being honest. Her arm ached a bit, but it was nothing that another application of the cream wouldn't cure. Overall, she felt well-rested and more stable than she had thought she would. "I had a really good night's sleep and I'm ready to do it now."

"Alright, then." Astrum opened up one of the drawers on his desk and began rummaging through, muttering to himself. He finally pulled out a few pieces of parchment and an automatic-inking quill, which he set before her. "This is part one of the written portion. You may begin now and take as long as you need. If you've got any questions, don't hesitate to ask."

"I won't." Nodding, she glanced down at the top piece of parchment. As she'd expected, it was a long list of questions requiring anything from a few words to several paragraphs on a wide range of topics from first year to fourth. She set her quill to the parchment and began to write, and for a long time, that was the only sound that could be heard in the small office. Professor Astrum involved himself with a thin book, though she couldn't help noticing with a jolt of curiosity that the cover was blank, leaving her no chance of figuring out what he was reading. Every time she glanced up, the man looked up from his book and gave her a friendly smile that invited her to ask questions. Ginny merely smiled in response and turned her attention back to the paper. It took her about forty-five minutes to finish, and she shook her hand out, wishing that the mild cramps would stop as she slid the parchment across the desk. Astrum gathered them together and placed them back into the drawer.

"That was easy enough, right?" he asked. He didn't wait for her to respond before he continued, "There's another part to the quiz before we begin the practical portion. In class, I asked the students to write an essay, but I'm guessing we're growing short on time, so I'd just like to ask you a couple of questions, if that's alright."

"Sure," she said slowly, wondering just what the essay topic for the class had been. She regarded him silently, wary as to what his questions might be. Her years at Hogwarts had been filled with people who had tried to get her to give up information on the Boy-Who-Lived, and that included that idiot Gilderoy Lockhart in her first year, so she wouldn't put it past any professor to act the exact same way. "Just so you know, I do want to make sure that these questions pertain to schoolwork and not to other students."

Astrum grinned, seemingly pleased with her answer. "Of course," he confirmed. "Actually, my questions relate to the field of Defence itself. Can you perform the Patronus charm?"

"Yes, I can." She spared a moment to think gratefully of Harry and his persistent determination to make all of them master the difficult charm that even many adult wizards were unable to perform.

"Really?" In spite of his comment, Astrum didn't look overly surprised. "Could you do it for me?"

Ginny stood up and drew out her wand. During the club last year, she had used the memory of connecting with Astoria for the first time to cast the charm, but this time, she had only to think of that morning, and the wonderful sensation of waking up in Harry Potter's arms. She shivered with glee and called out, "Expecto Patronum!"

The silvery white shape leapt from the end of her wand and flew once around the room. Ginny frowned in bewilderment as her patronus turned and made an easy landing on the top of Professor Astrum's desk. At first, she had thought that her horse patronus had become a winged-horse, but closer observation revealed that she now had the patronus of some sort of winged-cat. It was about twice the size of Crookshanks and sleek, with short fur and a long, slender tail. Upon seeing that there were no Dementors for it to chase away, the patronus hopped off of the desk, stalked over to Ginny, twined once about her legs, and then faded away.

"Not what you were expecting?" Astrum glanced at her.

"It was a horse before," she said dazedly, looking rather shell-shocked.

"Sometimes your patronus can change if you go through an event that is severely traumatizing or emotionally trying," he said gently, guiding her back over to the chair. He urged her to sit down and then pressed a fresh cup of tea into her hands as he smiled wryly. "It's not uncommon. Even falling in love can change a patronus. I know that from personal experience."

"You do?" Ginny blinked up at him. The tea was helping, and now she felt a little silly for her reaction. It was just such a shock to see that the patronus she had worked so hard for had changed into a creature that she didn't even recognize.

He chuckled, his eyes taking on a far-away look. "Oh, yes. It took me some time to learn the patronus charm, as I had learned a great deal of dark magic as a child, and that meant light-based charms were rather difficult for me. My first patronus was a large dog. Later, it changed to resemble my mate." His expression grew wistful.

"Your mate?" Her eyes widened slightly, and she looked up at the professor with a bewildered smile. Although 'mate' was a common term between friends, she sensed that Professor Astrum meant it in the more traditional way, which was surprising. It was rare to find a witch or wizard that was willing to refer to a husband, wife, or partner as their 'mate' because it generally referred to a lifetime bond between inhuman mortals. Realizing that it was likely he was tied to a creature of some sort, she found herself studying the man with new respect. "Who is – "

A knock came at the door, cutting off her question. Ginny's frown grew deeper when Astrum's face fell, and he gave a heavy, almost disappointed sigh as he moved away to open the door. She absently greeted Harry and Hermione as her two friends entered the office, all the while struggling to put her finger on something that was bothering her. Annoyingly enough, it refused to come to mind. Eventually, she gave up, knowing that it would come to her if she stopped thinking about it. At the very least, she could be assured that Professor Astrum was nothing like Umbridge, who had lobbied hard for the reduction of the rights of all creatures.

"Hermione, you're out of the Hospital Wing," she said instead, looking up at her friend happily. "Do you feel better?"

Smiling, Hermione nodded. It was Harry who answered, though. "Madame Pomfrey found that the smoke had done a bit of damage to her throat. Hermione isn't supposed to talk for the rest of today to give it a chance to heal, and she has to go back to the Hospital Wing tomorrow morning before classes to see if she's allowed to talk again."

Ginny's lips twitched, and she had to fight the urge to laugh when the image of a Hermione who couldn't speak trying to make her way through classes popped into her head. The professors probably wouldn't know what to do without Hermione's hand jumping into the air to answer every question. She met Harry's eyes and, by the grin on his face, knew that he was thinking exactly the same thing. They had to turn away from each other to keep from breaking out into laughter. Hermione scowled, clearly aware of just what the two of them were thinking, and stuck her nose into the air as she huffily walked over to the seat that Professor Astrum had conjured for her. That left Harry to take the seat beside Ginny and try his best to stifle his laughter.

"Would you like some tea, Miss Granger?" Astrum asked with a hastily stifled chuckle. "Mr Potter?"

"I'm alright," Harry said, having successfully stemmed his amusement. Hermione nodded and accepted the cup she was handed. Madame Pomfrey had told her that warm liquids would be soothing for her throat.

"Now, I've asked you here because I'm interested in starting up a version of the defence club that you had running last year," said Astrum, taking a seat behind his desk. "I've asked a few of the other students, and I'm told that you and Miss Granger were the ones who had the most decisions in the process. You were actually the teacher, Mr Potter?"

Looking slightly embarrassed, Harry nodded slowly. "I was, but it was actually Hermione's and Ron's idea. Our professor last year was... Well, she wasn't a very good teacher, and she seemed to think that reading the textbook was enough. She didn't want to teach

us any practical magic because she didn't want to have anything to do with the idea that Voldemort was back." When their teacher failed to flinch at the name, Harry warmed to the subject and began speaking more quickly. "Those of us who believed that he had returned decided to make a club so that we could practice magic, like the Reductor Curse and the Stunning Spell, which would help us fight against Death Eaters if we ever met up with them. Hermione decided that since I was the one with the most experience in fighting, I should be the one to help teach the others." His shoulders rose and fell in a shrug. "So... I did."

"And you were a very good one, too," said Ginny. Hermione nodded vigorously. "You taught all of us a lot, Harry."

Harry blushed. "Well, we all learned from each other," he said awkwardly. "The practice was good for me, too. We had people from all different houses and levels and it was going well. Eventually, though, we were found out by Umbridge, so we had to shut it down... and since we had competent professors this year, I didn't think..." He trailed off.

"As flattered as I am to hear that you think I'm competent, I think that a defence club is an excellent idea, and I'm very eager to get it up and running," said Astrum. "It would be very beneficial to all of the students, and I'd like to get everyone involved this time instead of just a handful of those who are interested. After all, it will be officially sanctioned this time." He grinned.

Hermione leaned over and picked up one of the pieces of parchment still lying on Astrum's desk. After stealing the quill Ginny had written her quiz with, she began scribbling away. Astrum took the parchment when she handed it to him and read it silently. At one point, he stopped and asked to see one of the coins that Hermione had created. She dug it out of her pocket and handed it to him, allowing the clearly fascinated man to examine it before he continued reading while Hermione sat back and folded her arms with a satisfied smile. She had initially broached the idea of continuing the D.A. with Harry at the beginning of the year, only to be rebuked. Now there would be no way for Harry to get out of it.

"Interesting, very interesting," the man mused. "I see here that all of the students were learning the same spells as once in a large group. I've been doing some preliminary outlining, and I was thinking that

the best way for this club to be run is if there were three different groups. Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced. Depending on where the students are in their strength and knowledge, they'll be assigned to a group. That way no one will be left behind. Students from the Intermediate and Advanced groups can help supervise the group below them for extra credit. Does that sound acceptable?"

It did to Ginny. She could already tell that it would resolve a fundamental problem with the D.A., which had been that some students were more advanced than others. There had been times when Harry had been forced to keep some students from moving on too far ahead of those who didn't learn as quickly or easily. From the sound of it, Professor Astrum would be the head of each group, but now she could see what he meant about having students who would help him. As Hermione began to write on more parchment, she tried to imagine herself helping some of the younger students to learn spells and quickly decided that it sounded fun. It will also serve to help keep Harry out of the spotlight, which he would no doubt appreciate immensely.

"How often will the groups meet?" Astrum read from the parchment. "I figured that each group would meet once a week with additional practice days here and there. The meetings will be mandatory, extra practice won't. I know some students have more demanding schedules, or other responsibilities, like the Quidditch team." He shot a glance at Harry and Ginny and winked. "We'll work that out."

"Sounds good to me," Harry said, leaning back in his chair and stretching. His casual movement jarred his pocket, and the mirror inside slipped out and fell to the ground with a loud clatter. He jumped up with a curse, heedless of the fact that a professor was in the room, and stooped to retrieve it. Fortunately, the glass was still intact, and he shot a relieved look at Ginny. "Sorry."

"What's that?" Astrum asked, his voice entirely casual as he set aside the parchment Hermione had given him. "One of those two-way mirrors? They're quite rare, you know."

"I know," Harry and Ginny said together before looking at each other.

"Can I ask where you - " Whatever else the professor had been about to say was cut off by another knock. Astrum tensed slightly before he stood up and went over to the door. He opened it to reveal

Albus Dumbledore, dressed in yellow robes that had a pattern of butterflies and bumblebees flying around. "Good evening, Headmaster."

"Ah, Professor, I didn't realize you had visitors," Dumbledore said, glancing at the three students. Harry took the opportunity to slide the mirror back into his pocket, but not before Ginny noticed Dumbledore's keen gaze on it. The pleasure in his eyes was visible only for a moment, but it was enough. She made a mental note to have both mirrors checked for tracking and listening charms; she didn't know what was going on with Dumbledore lately, but she wouldn't have put it past him to use the mirrors as a way to know what was going on with Harry, and that wasn't what she had intended at all.

"We were just discussing the Defence Association," Astrum explained coolly. He shot a glance at his desk, as though he would have liked to have retreated behind it, but didn't move. Ginny realized with a start that his position effectively placed him between Dumbledore and the three teenagers. "I've had many reports that it was quite successful last year. Implementing something similar for the whole school could be quite beneficial when it comes to teaching the kids to defend themselves."

"Quite a wonderful idea," Dumbledore approved, blue eyes twinkling. "Very useful, but I'm afraid I must ask that you postpone the rest of your meeting. I have something urgent to discuss with you."

"We'll go," Harry said hastily, standing up.

Astrum scowled. "Mr Potter, I'd like a list of all the spells the D.A. went through, if that's possible."

Harry nodded as Hermione got to her feet. Ginny frowned and reluctantly joined her friends as Professor Astrum bid the three of them good-bye and saw them out of his office. She was the last one out, and she just barely caught a glimpse of their teacher glaring at the headmaster before the door closed behind them. Then Harry took her wrist and pulled her and Hermione down the hallway and around the corner, then up a flight of stairs. He stopped suddenly and pushed aside a tapestry to reveal that there was actually a hidden corridor where they could speak without worrying about someone overhearing.

"I wish we could overhear what they're talking about," Ginny said the moment they were out of sight, keeping her voice soft.

"So do I." Harry looked thoughtful. "Maybe this time around Dumbledore is actually keeping a closer eye on a D.A.D.A professor. It would be nice to get through a year without being hated, humiliated, or stalked..."

Hermione tapped him on the arm and shot him an amused look. "Professor Astrum seems like a good guy," she rasped. "He has good ideas when it comes to the new defence club and his teaching methods are actually sound. Don't judge him yet; he hasn't done anything that proves he's good or bad."

"She has a point," said Ginny.

Harry shook his head. "I don't trust any of them," he muttered, but refused to elaborate anymore. Whether he meant the D.A.D.A. professors or the professors at Hogwarts as a whole, Ginny wasn't sure. She exchanged a worried look with Hermione but couldn't think of any way to approach the subject with him. True, she and Harry were gradually growing closer, but she didn't think that they were at the point where she felt comfortable challenging him like that. From the look on Hermione's face, she appeared to be feeling the same way.

"I'm going to the library," Hermione told them finally, one hand unconsciously massaging her neck.

"I'll come, too," Harry said. "Ginny?"

"No. Thanks." She watched the two of them head down the passage way before she leaned against the wall and sighed. There was something about Chance Astrum that was throwing her off-balance, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was. Really, Harry had every reason to be distrustful of the man, so why did her instincts tell her that he could be trusted? They didn't know the slightest thing about him! Ginny put a hand to her head and pushed off of the wall, deciding that she would track Astoria down and connect. At the very least, it might help to slow her spinning mind down so that she could try and make some sense out of everything that had happened.

NIR

Once the children were gone, Chance's cheerful smile slowly slipped into a surprisingly cold mask. He finally moved, sliding behind his desk and taking a seat in his chair as Dumbledore sat down in the seat that Ginny had vacated. The older man's movements were calm, almost absent, and he didn't appear to be phased by the glare that was being directed at him. If anything, he seemed rather pleased with the situation as he called for a house elf. One appeared instantly bearing a tray with two fresh cups of teas and a platter of biscuits. Chance ignored the offering and folded his arms, wondering what Dumbledore was up to.

"What is it you wanted to discuss, Headmaster?" he asked bluntly.

"I had noticed that you were visiting with Mr Potter, Miss Granger, and Miss Ginevra," said Dumbledore, blue eyes suddenly frosty. "I suppose I wanted to make sure that Mr Potter would not leave this room with more information than he should."

Chance gritted his teeth, though he made an effort to suppress the surge of annoyance. That was, after all, precisely what he wanted Dumbledore to think. It would be much easier if the man believed that Chance was trying to spend time with Harry, since that would make him less inclined to wonder about any meetings that he scheduled with Ginny. But that didn't mean it wasn't also incredibly aggravating to be spied upon like he was a child. Grimly, he met the pale eyes of his former mentor and, even though it was a drain on his magic, deliberately raised his shields so that Dumbledore couldn't work his little tricks.

"As I recall, Headmaster, I couldn't tell Harry the truth even if I wanted to," Chance replied, making no effort to inject even a bit of warmth into his voice. "I told you. We were talking about the D.A. and how we could create a school-wide version. I'd had a few ideas on implementing it but thought that it would be wise to get the opinion of the people who ran it last year."

"It's unlike you to be so cautious," Dumbledore remarked steadily. If he realized that Chance had summoned shields, he gave no indication. "Why Miss Ginevra's presence?"

Recognizing that the older man wasn't even trying to be sneaky in his questions, Chance dropped his shoulders and sighed. "I couldn't exactly ask Ron, could I?" he said, keeping his voice level. "That would've been asking for a fight. Ginny's a strong witch. Has a lot of talent in charms. Any of the professors here could tell you that. I want her to be part of my Advanced group so that she can help tutor the other students. It only makes sense."

Dumbledore said nothing for a moment. Instead, he took a long sip of his tea and made a thoughtful sound as he completely switched subjects. "My offer stills stands, Sirius. You may tell Remus that you are alive if it's what you wish. I understand that the wolf is having quite a difficult time without its mate." His knowing gaze froze Chance on the spot. "There was, after all, a moment when you died. The connection between you and Remus hasn't been repaired, so the wolf is mourning. I'm not sure how much longer Remus can survive."

Bastard. Chance swallowed hard, feeling absolutely sick. Why hadn't he stopped to consider that before? Werewolves mated for life. It was a common fact, but what most people didn't know was the strength of the connection that formed between mates. He'd known that Remus would be suffering without him, but some part of him had hoped – prayed – that the wolf would instinctively know that Sirius was still alive. But Dumbledore, damn the man, was right, and if Remus really thought he was dead... It took every ounce of his willpower to keep himself from physically shuddering at the thought of the pain that Remus must be enduring. His every instinct screamed against putting his lover in any more danger, but what choice did he have?

"Maybe I'll make a visit to Grimmauld Place next weekend," he said heavily, loathing the thought that he would have to wait another week to make sure that Remus would be alright. At least their meeting would happen before the next full moon... He cringed inwardly at the thought of the one that had just passed. Suddenly, his night spent curled up in the middle of his bed, crying out helplessly at the phantom pains coming from the agonized wolf, seemed like nothing.

A satisfied look on his face, Dumbledore nodded. "In the meantime, I would ask that you refrain from being in close quarters with Harry. I wouldn't want him to notice anything unusual."

"Yes sir," he muttered. What was the man playing at? Chance eyed him, his mind racing but getting nowhere as he tried to work out Dumbledore's game. Was he pleased that Chance was going to tell Remus the truth? Or was he unhappy? It was impossible to know. Dumbledore had one of the best poker faces that he'd ever come across. Automatically, he rose when the headmaster did, setting his untouched cup of tea down on his desk. Was he making the right decision to tell Remus? Would that be putting the man in even more danger? Inwardly, he swore, hoping that his face didn't reveal any of his inner confusion. It was nearly impossible to play this kind of game with Dumbledore when the man was so practiced at it.

"I quite enjoyed our conversation, Chance," Dumbledore said pleasantly, as though they had just been discussing the weather. He opened the door of the office and stepped just outside before turning to face Chase, who paused in the doorway. The younger man was in need of some serious time alone to think, and his office was one of the few safe spaces in which he could do it.

"Yes, as did I," Chance muttered. The words were a sour lie and he suspected that Dumbledore likely not only knew it, but took pleasure in it. "Please feel free to stop by any time, Headmaster. Though next time," he couldn't resist adding, "I'd appreciate it if you could make sure that I wasn't having a meeting with some students beforehand."

"I'll make an attempt to do that," the headmaster agreed. His head twisted sharply, and Chance followed his gaze to the end of the corridor, where he was surprised to see none other than Draco Malfoy and a seventh-year Ravenclaw standing in the shadows. The face of the Ravenclaw rang a bell, but he couldn't quite place the boy. As the two men watched, the Ravenclaw reached out and placed a hand on Malfoy's shoulder, speaking softly but intently. Malfoy shook his head and hunched his shoulders, looking upset. After a moment, he shrugged off the other boy's hand and took a step backwards, his arm coming up defensively, like he was expecting a blow to the face. Chance frowned, half tempted to intervene. Dumbledore's hand on his shoulder kept him in place as Malfoy shook his head again before turning and walking away. The Ravenclaw scowled after him, anger in his face, before he stormed off in the opposite direction.

"What was that about?" he asked flatly. There was no doubt in his mind that the man had wanted to see him the interaction. The question was, why?

"A friendly dispute between friends, I'm sure," came the reply. "Well, Professor, I'll take my leave. I have a pressing appointment with the Ministry to attend. Good day."

Without another word, the headmaster left, sweeping down the hall and leaving an utterly bemused Chance behind. He stared after the older man for several minutes before he finally shook his head and retreated back into his office. His head was spinning with many questions and a noticeable lack of answers, and it was giving him a bad headache. Sighing, he dropped back into his office chair, not yet at the point where he needed to succumb to the headache potion in his drawer. Telling Remus was not what he wanted to do, but there was always a chance that his lover could fill in some of the blanks. Perhaps together, they would be able to figure out a way to keep Harry safe from both Voldemort and Dumbledore.

Please review!

A/N: I'm not sure why the MILD SLASH in this story came as such a shock, being that there was a clear warning posted in chapter seven. So I'm going to say it one last time, and from now on, I'm completely ignoring everyone who complains about it. This story will contain extremely MILD SLASH. If you can't abide by the MILD SLASH that will be in the story, please turn around and leave. There. Honestly, I don't know how much more obvious I can make it, seriously. For everyone who did not ignore the warning and still wants to stay with me... please enjoy.

Surprisingly, going back to classes wasn't as hard as Ginny had thought that it might be. For the most part, her professors appeared to sympathise with her situation, and all of them except for Professor Snape went out of their way to make life as easy for her as possible. She was able to catch up on the work she had missed within a couple of days, and no one penalized her for late assignments. Professor Astrum never made any attempt to approach them about the defence club again, but when she came down to breakfast Thursday morning, there was a bulletin posted in the Gryffindor Common Room about a meeting taking place after dinner. It was mandatory for all students, including the few sixth and seventh years who had opted out of Defence Against the Dark Arts, and would be taking place in the Great Hall that night. Rumours were abuzz the whole day about what the professor was planning.

Ginny found herself looking forward to the chance to learn more about defence. After her encounter with Tom Riddle in her first year, it had occurred to her that she might one day again face the Dark Lord, and she wanted to be ready. The meeting wasn't until eight, but she entered the Great Hall a good fifteen minutes ahead of time. Some students had already arrived, most notably a sulking Slytherin Quidditch Team who had had their practice postponed in lieu of the meeting, and she spotted Harry, Hermione, and a few other students gathered at the front of the room near Astrum. He looked up when she entered and beckoned for her to join them. Ron, who was sitting at the Gryffindor table, glowered at her as she walked up the aisle.

"Good evening, Ginny," Astrum said cheerfully. "How are you doing? Ready to learn?"

"I'm ready for something," she agreed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Astrum had never gotten around to giving her the practical portion of the exam, but he had appeared to be pleased

with her performance in class. They were learning about the differences between offensive and defensive magic, and what each could potentially offer in the middle of a battle.

"Excellent. I believe everyone is here, then. Sonorous." He tapped his wand against his throat, and when he spoke again, his voice was loud enough for the students to hear. "Good evening, students. I suspect you're all wondering why I've gathered you here. The truth is, it's time for us all to face the fact that the Dark Lord Voldemort has returned." Gasps of fear interrupted whatever he had been about to say next, and Astrum waited patiently for the students to settle down before he continued. "Even though I would like nothing better than to be able to shield you all from the battles, it's likely that most of you will have to fight at some point in the near future. It's my job to prepare for you that as best I can. That's why I've decided to create a defence club that will help you all to hone your skills and become better at magic in general. This is non-negotiable," he added, glancing in the direction of some scowling students. With another wave of his wand, thick pieces of parchment popped into view before every student.

Ginny took the parchment and scanned it, reading silently. It basically outlined what they'd already been told about the club, which was that there would be three different levels. Astrum had assigned most of the students to a level based on their performance in his class, but students would be able to ascend to a higher level if he felt that they had improved. On the other hand, a student that was seen to be struggling could be placed at a lower level to receive extra help. The parchment strongly suggested that all students attend as many of the meetings as possible, as the practice could one day save their lives. She lowered the parchment and looked out across the Great Hall. Her eyes immediately sought out Astoria's and they shared a tiny smile.

"I'll now assign you to your levels," said Astrum. "Number ones will be Beginners, number two will be Intermediates, and number threes will be Advanced." As he spoke, he began moving his wand in a complicated manoeuvre. A ball of yellow light formed at the tip of his wand and leapt free, exploding into a thousand different streaks of light that shot towards every Hogwarts student. Ginny jumped when one of the streaks struck her wrist and formed a silver chain bracelet with a little metal plate that had the number 3 deeply engraved into it.

All over the hall, students began cheering or groaning when they discovered their level.

"For now, I'd like to meet with my Advanced group. The rest of you, please be sure to show up at next the designated time. The next meeting will show up on your bracelet at all times," Astrum explained, sparing a moment to flash Hermione a broad smile. The girl flushed and stiffened with pride over the implied compliment. "If I ever need you to assemble quickly, your bracelet will grow warm, and the time and meeting place with all appear on the silver plate below your number. I suggest you do not ignore it." His voice held a distinct warning. "Everyone except the Advanced group may leave."

Most of the students stood up and left, leaving behind a handful of children. It took a few minutes for the Great Hall to empty, and in that time Ginny spotted Astoria, Luna, and Hannah, as well as Draco Malfoy, Blaise Zabini, Susan Bones, Justin Flinch-Fletcher, Ron, Seamus, Dean, Katie Bell, and Cho Chang. The others she didn't recognize, as they were mostly sixth and seventh years from other houses. All of them possessed a silver plate bearing the number 3. Astrum surveyed the small group and appeared to be satisfied as he checked their names against a short list he was holding.

"Very good," he said at last, folding the parchment and putting it away. "Now, as I was saying, as the Advanced group, you'll be learning more difficult offensive and defensive spells. To start with, we'll be doing group work, but as we progress I may split you up into smaller groups or two or three to focus on different spells once I learn more about your individual strengths and weaknesses. The quizzes you took in class were an excellent starting point, but unfortunately, they didn't tell me everything I needed to know." He wore a small grin as he surveyed the group. "Just to give you fair warning, because you're Advanced, I expect every one of you to give me 100% of your focus and power. We're here to work hard, not look pretty."

"Great," Draco Malfoy muttered, looking less than enthusiastic. Several other students, including Cho Chang, seemed to feel the same way. "Is there a reason why we were volunteered for this group?"

"Your power level and experience got you here. If you don't want to work hard, feel free to leave, but it could mean your neck someday,"

Astrum told him calmly. "When Voldemort or a Death Eater comes after you, having the extra practice could mean the difference between walking away and not living to tell the tale. Now, Mr Malfoy, which would you rather?"

Draco swallowed hard, his face unusually pale. He didn't say anything, and that seemed to be enough for Astrum, who began dividing the group into pairs of twos. Ginny was paired with Astoria, and she noticed that Harry was paired with Susan Bones, while Hermione was paired up with Luna Lovegood. Hannah ended up with a Slytherin seventh-year she didn't recognize. It didn't escape her notice that no one was paired with someone from the same house. Apparently Professor Astrum was making it a goal to promote inner house unity, though she didn't think it was a good idea for the man to have put Ron and Draco together. That was just asking for trouble.

"Who here knows the Patronus charm?" Astrum asked. About half the students raised their hands, including Draco. "Those that don't, I want you to start on that. Have your partner help you to begin with. We'll move on in a little while to something no one is familiar with, but even those of you who can cast a patronus could do with some practice. That charm could very well save your life someday. It's your only protection against the Dementors." He performed the movements of the charm, though he didn't cast it.

"Do you know it?" Ginny asked, turning to look at Astoria.

"No, but you do. That should help," Astoria said. But she didn't sound very enthusiastic, and Ginny knew why. Like most pureblood children, Astoria's early magical education had mostly consisted of darker spells in an effort to make her magic in general more susceptible to the dark. That would make it more difficult for her to learn such a light-based charm. But in spite of that, she didn't suggest that they connect. Although they could learn spells through each other, it sometimes made their grasp or comprehension of spells looser and weaker than if they learned it the normal way. The Patronus Charm was something that Astoria needed to be able to create on her own.

"Here," she said instead. "I'll cast it. Watch me. Expecto Patronum!" Her wand moved in the appropriate way, and instantly, the little cat-like creature leapt from the end of her wand in a blaze of misty silver.

Ginny watched it, smiling a little. Now that she wasn't so surprised, she had the time to appreciate that her patronus was actually kind of cute. She made a mental note to go to the library and see if she could find out what kind of cat it was.

"I think I got it. Expecto Patronum!" Astoria called out sharply, waving her wand. Nothing happened, not even the slightest little bit of mist, and her face fell.

"Sometimes that happens," Ginny said honestly. "Try again. Think about something really happy." She spoke the words with a certain amount of caution. Astoria's life hadn't been filled with much happiness, and it wasn't likely she had many memories to pick from. "If it helps, I used to use the memory of us connecting when I created mine."

Astoria smirked. "And when do you use now?"

"None of your business," came the hasty reply and Ginny twisted away, flushing. She hung back, watching as Astoria screwed her face up and tried for a second time. The results were the same, but she kept on trying. If there was one thing Ginny could say for the girl, it was that the word "stubborn" didn't even come close to describing her. By the end of a half hour, she was able to produce a thin, misty vapour that disappeared quickly, but at least it was a start.

Finally, Astrum called a halt to things. "I'm pleased with your progress," he told the group. "I'd like you to continue practicing on your own. Now, I'd like us to move on to the anti-gravity charm. Please watch closely. Verto Turbatio!" He twisted his wand sideways, then snapped it straight up. Instantly, a pale mist that looked something like the Patronus charm began spewing out of the tip of his wand. "Anyone like to have a go of it?"

"I'll do it," Harry volunteered. He left Susan and walked determinedly towards the mist. To the rest of them, it looked as though he had merely stepped into a fine cloud. His body was still visible, including the disoriented expression that spread across his face as he stopped walking. Ginny looked on with interest as Harry looked from side to side and then closed his eyes, shaking his head.

"As you can see, the mist causes the victim to experience the sensation of the world having flipped upside down. Right now Mr

Potter feels as though he is walking on the ceiling," Astrum explained. "You can imagine how it would feel to be outside. Finite Incantatem," he added, ending the charm. "Thank you, Potter. I want one of you to practice the spell and the other to give it a shot. Remember to really snap your wand when you're saying the last part of Turbatio. It's particularly important."

"I bloody well hate that charm," Harry muttered as he stumbled by Ginny. "I had to face it in the maze during the Fourth Task, and it's as annoying now as it was then."

Ginny hid her smile by looking at Astoria. "Do you want me to try? You've been casting for quite a while."

"I guess I can be the guinea pig for a while," Astoria said, looking less than enthused by the offer.

"Verto Turbatio!" Ginny called out with about half the other students in the class. She did her best to mimic the sharp movements, but nothing came from the tip of her wand.

"Try a harder snap," Astoria suggested, flicking her wand up. "Like that."

"Got it." Ginny frowned and narrowed her eyes, putting all of her focus on learning the charm. Although she liked charms and usually had good luck with them, they could be tricky for even the best witch or wizard to get a grasp of. She was so focused on her work that she stopped paying attention to what was going on with the rest of the class. So she didn't notice that after a student approached Ron Weasley and spoke to him in a low voice, he suddenly stopped laughing at Draco and stiffened, a blank look in his blue eyes. It soon vanished to be replaced with malicious glee as the redheaded boy turned and began walking towards Harry, who was in the middle of giving Susan's charm a try. The instant Harry stepped into the mist, Ron's wand snapped up and he hissed a spell under his breath.

Harry's cry of pain drew the attention of everyone in the room. He collapsed on the floor, one hand clasped to his shoulder. Blood gushed through his fingers and streamed down his legs, soaking his robes. Susan gasped, her hand flying to her mouth, and fell to her knees beside him as Hermione rushed to Harry's side. Both of them began trying to assess the damage done as Astrum quickly joined

them, looking alarmed. Ron stood back from the small group, a broad smirk on his face. He didn't make the slightest effort to hide the fact that his wand was in his hand, nor that he was immensely pleased.

"Zabini, run for Madame Pomfrey!" Astrum barked, kneeling next to Harry and taking a hold of his wrist. Hermione leaned back to allow her professor room to manoeuvre and caught of Ron. Her eyes flashed.

"Ron! What is wrong with you?" she shouted, rising to her feet and glaring at him.

"He deserved it, Hermione," Ron protested, seemingly genuinely surprised that she could be so angry. "Look, it's not like I did that much damage. The spell nearly missed, you know..."

"You.." Hermione just stared at him, speechless.

"Alright, no one move," Astrum commanded before Ron could say anything else. "I want all of you to line up over there this instant. Don't speak and do not, under any circumstances, cast a spell."

With little grumbling, the students did as their professor had commanded. Ginny looked on, worried, as Susan scooted up behind Harry so that he could lean against her when Astrum placed his hands on Harry's arm and drew down the collar of his robe. She fought back a little surge of jealousy as Harry did just that, reclining his head against Susan's shoulder. His face was pale, and she could tell that he was in pain just from the look on his face. The blood hadn't stopped or slowed, and Astrum didn't seem to know how to stop it. Fortunately, Madame Pomfrey rushed into the room and made a beeline for the three of them, effectively blocking Harry from view. The woman performed a few hasty spells with her wand and then conjured a stretcher before she effortlessly levitated Harry onto it.

"Wands out," the professor ordered as soon as Madame Pomfrey was gone. Susan walked back over to them, looking stunned. Her robes were just as soaked with blood as Harry's had been, but it didn't seem to bother her.

"What for?" a fifth-year Hufflepuff whined. "I have Astronomy in fifteen minutes. I'm going to be late!"

Astrum whirled on her, looking furious. "Then – you – will – be – late!" he hissed, eyes flashing. "No one is leaving until I find out for sure who was behind that."

"It was Weasley," said Draco. "I watched him and he confessed."

"Thank you, Mr Malfoy," Astrum said coldly. "I won't bother to ask why you didn't stop Mr Weasley when you saw what he was going to do. No, I know a way to find out for certain, and when I do, that person is going to be in a great deal of trouble. So all of you, right now, hold your wands out in front of you. Someone in this room is responsible and I want to know who."

Grimly, he began moving down the row, taking each wand and casting the Prior Incantato spell. Most of the wands came up with the anti-gravity spell, which emerged as a fine mist that disappeared quickly. Astrum always cancelled the spell immediately after the last five spells each wand had performed, so that the spell searched no further. Ginny glanced up into his face as he took her wand and resisted the urge to squirm at the dark expression on his face. He looked totally pissed, and she almost felt sorry for whoever had actually cast the spell, because he or she was going to be in a lot of trouble.

Shortly before he would've gotten to Ron, Astrum came to a seventh-year Ravenclaw who didn't look especially happy as he handed his wand over to the man and took a step backwards. Astrum ignored the dirty look he was receiving as he held the wand up and performed the spell again. The first image to emerge was that of the anti-gravity spell. But the second one made several people gasp in shock as the faint image of Ron Weasley's blank face drifted out of the tip of the wand. Ginny's eyes widened, recognizing the Imperious Spell. She couldn't believe it.

"Mr Worrac, would you care to explain?" Astrum asked, narrowing his eyes slightly. "You've been using one of the Unforgivables on your classmates? Even if you hadn't ordered Mr Weasley to attack Mr Potter, that could earn you several years in Azkaban."

Worrac paled slightly but squared his shoulders. He was a small boy, about the same height as Ginny, but stocky, and well-muscled in his upper torso. He sported shoulder-length dark hair tied back in a low ponytail and dark brown eyes that bordered on black. His face looked somewhat familiar to Ginny, but she couldn't place him. Instinctively, she took a slight step back from him, hoping that Astrum would take care. The boy didn't look happy that he was being challenged, and wand or no wand, he looked like he would have the strength to give Astrum a run for his money.

"Y'can't prove I ordered that," he said finally. His voice was raspy, like he hadn't used it for some time.

"Considering that none of the other students in this room cast the spell, I think we can guess," Astrum replied coldly.

"How d'you know that someone else didn't curse him a long time ago?"

"I've been watching you," Astrum answered simply. "You've cast the anti-gravity spell at least a dozen times since you entered this room. The Imperious Curse was the second to last spell you cast. Since one person can only be under the influence of one Imperious at a time, that means you cursed Mr Weasley within the past ten minutes. I'm certain you can see where I'm going with this."

Apparently, Worrac could, because he muttered a few words under his breath and threw something into Astrum's face. The professor screamed and staggered backwards, hands covering his face as Worrac turned sharply. Ginny yanked her wand out, intending to stun him, but before she could, Worrac disappeared. A few spells struck the place where he had been and bounced off harmlessly, striking different targets. Cho Chang went down, Stunned, and so did Seamus. Ropes grabbed onto Blaise Zabini and Hannah Abbott, snapping the two of them together. Swearing under her breath, Ginny ignored her classmates and rushed to Astrum's side, worried for the man.

"Professor, are you alright?" she asked urgently, grabbing his wrists. He had collapsed to the ground and was groaning faintly. When he pulled his hands away, she saw that his face was covered with huge boils. She couldn't help recoiling from the sight. "Someone go get Madame Pomfrey!"

A couple of students left the room at a run. Astoria appeared at Ginny's side and helped her to lay Astrum down on the ground. He was barely conscious by that point, and she hoped that it was just from the pain and not from a more sinister reaction or side-effect to the potion. Madame Pomfrey arrived minutes later and hurried over. She frowned when she saw the state of her colleague and didn't even bother giving him an examination. With a flick of her wand, she conjured another stretcher and quickly pushed the ailing professor out of the room. Professor McGonagall swept in just as Pomfrey was leaving. A hard look crossed her face when she saw Astrum, and she turned to face the remaining students with an expression that made most of them wince.

"What happened?" she said, her voice clipped and promising a severe retribution for the one who had caused so much panic. The remaining students exchanged nervous looks, no one wanting to be the one who risked pissing Professor McGonagall off. Eventually, Hermione cleared her throat and spoke.

"We were having a meeting for the Advanced group of the defence club," she said softly. "Professor Astrum was instructing us in the use of the anti-gravity charm when Ron suddenly attacked Harry." She glanced at Ron and then looked away, pain in her brown eyes. "Harry went down and we summoned Madame Pomfrey. Once he'd been taken away, Professor Astrum said he wanted to know who had cast the spell. He took our wands and started using the Prior Incantato spell." Professor McGonagall's lips thinned at that, but she nodded for Hermione to continue. "When he got to a Ravenclaw by the name of Worrac, he found out that Worrac was the one who cast the Imperious curse on Ron and made him attack Harry."

Professor McGonagall gasped. "Where is Worrac now?" she demanded.

"He disappeared. I suppose he must have had a portkey, because it's impossible for anyone to apparate inside of Hogwarts." Hermione bit her lip. "Before he escaped, he threw some sort of potion into Professor Astrum's face to distract him. It caused boils to spring up all over his face, and he collapsed shortly before Madame Pomfrey came back."

"Mr Weasley, I want you to come with me," said the woman, looking pale. "We're going to visit the Headmaster. The rest of you return to your Common Rooms. Don't speak a word of what happened to anyone, understand?"

Without waiting to see if her orders were carried out, she beckoned to Ron and turned, striding from the room. Ron trailed after her, his wand still dangling from his hand, a somewhat vacant look on his face. Ginny watched the rest of the students leave and shook her head silently at Astoria when her friend paused with an inquiring look. There was no way she was going back to her dormitory when Harry was in the Hospital Wing. Hermione seemed to be thinking the same thing, because she joined Ginny once the rest of the Great Hall had emptied and, without discussing it, the two of them turned in that direction.

"We're spending far too much time at this place," Hermione muttered as they neared. Ginny snorted and pushed the door open, entering silently. Madame Pomfrey didn't notice them; she was busily working over Harry, stemming the flow of blood. Professor Astrum was lying on the bed next to him with a bright yellow cloth over his face. He wasn't moving, and she wondered if he'd passed out from the pain. Harry glanced up at them over Pomfrey's shoulder and offered a weak, pained smile.

The two girls sat down on one of the far beds, well out of Madame Pomfrey's way, and watched as she bustled around forcing potions down Harry's throat and doing her best to heal the gash across his shoulder. There was a worried look on her face as she worked, and finally, she turned to Harry with a grim look. "You've really done it this time, Potter," she observed, wrapping a bandage loosely around the wound. "It will be a few days before you regain the mobility of your arm back, and you know what that means."

A look of dawning horror made Harry's emerald eyes go wide. "No! But Madame Pomfrey, the first Quidditch match of the year is tomorrow. I have to - "

"I don't want to hear it," she cut him off. "I'm sorry, but that's just the way it is. There's no way you'll be able to fly a broom right now. Your arm isn't strong enough to hold on with the kind of stunts you pull, and you could do a lot of damage if you tried, to the point where you could suffer problems with it for the rest of your life. I've done what I

can, but there's only so much I can do." She shook her head. "It doesn't help that you've been healed so often that your body is becoming immune to many of the most basic spells and potions. I'm having to use stronger magic that aren't necessarily good for you."

Harry looked crushed. "But... but..."

"No buts, Potter." A brief look of sympathy flashed across her face. "Don't worry. There will be other matches and this year, with any luck, you'll be able to participate in all of them."

That didn't seem to offer much comfort to Harry. Ginny and Hermione slipped off of the bed and went over to him as Madame Pomfrey went to attend to Professor Astrum. Hermione sat down in the chair on the other side of his bed, while Ginny perched herself at the end, far enough away from his wounded shoulder to avoid hurting him if she shifted. Harry stared down at his lap with his hands clenched tightly in his lap. He had so been looking forward to the first game of the season after the ban that had been imposed on him by Umbridge. Hearing that he couldn't be a part of the team again was like torture.

Hermione looked rather lost. She had never quite been able to understand the fascination (obsession) that Harry and Ron had with Quidditch, but she gave comforting her best shot. "Don't worry, Harry. I'm sure that the team will be able to win without you. I mean, it would be wonderful if you could play, and obviously they'd have a much easier time if you could, but they've got an excellent team this year. Gryffindor will still be ahead, and at least we're only playing against Hufflepuff..."

"Thanks," Harry said. Her words didn't really make him feel any better, but he appreciated the fact that she tried. "I know it shouldn't matter. It's just... it's the first game..."

Ginny didn't say anything. It wasn't that she couldn't think of anything, but rather that she knew nothing would help. She didn't love Quidditch the way that Harry did – it was fun, and she'd enjoyed playing as a child because it gave her and her brothers a common game to bond over – but she could understand how hard it was to be left out of the first game of the season after Harry had been practicing so hard. Silently, she reached out and placed a hand over Harry's. After a moment, he twisted his hand so that he could lace

their fingers together. The movement made her heart skip a beat, but Harry didn't seem to notice, as he turned to Hermione and asked what he had missed after Madame Pomfrey had ushered him out of the room. Hermione began to fill him in, and Ginny was only too happy to sit there beside the boy she loved, holding his hand and comforting him.

Please review!

A/N: Thanks for all of the reviews. It's nice to see that some people are willing to stick with me and see the story through. Someone did mention the dreaded "H" word, though. Horcruxes. I knew it was only a matter of time before someone brought the damn things up. I'm not sure how much they'll enter into the story, because honestly I happen to think that they're a pain to deal with. This story is already AU in that it doesn't follow canon (obviously) and it will probably become even more AU when we get to that. Fortunately, that won't be for a while. Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays, everyone. Please enjoy!

Who was Alexander Worrac? Hermione flipped through a couple of books and paused to rest her chin on her hand with a thoughtful look. It was the morning after the disastrous meeting of the defence club, and D.A.D.A classes had been cancelled for the day since Professor Astrum was still in the Hospital Wing. She'd taken the opportunity to head for the library, as she had no interest whatsoever in talking to any of the curious students who hadn't been around to witness what had happened Worrac and Astrum. For the past hour, she'd been trying to do some research about the Worrac family, but she wasn't coming up with anything.

"God, how did this get so screwed up?" she whispered, dropping her disgusted gaze to one of the utterly useless books. There was a connection here, but she was missing it. She just knew that if she could get her hands on that list from the Ministry, it would answer a hell of a lot of questions. But how was she supposed to procure anything from the Ministry, especially information that was no doubt kept under lock and key, when she had no clearance? That wasn't the kind of thing the Ministry would be willing to just hand over to anyone, much less a student from Hogwarts.

Sighing deeply, she closed her books and drummed her fingers on the table, thinking hard. She didn't know many older witches and wizards. There was Tonks, who might be willing to help, but she didn't know if Tonks had that kind of sway, and she was reluctant to do anything that might put the woman's job in danger. But Hermione wasn't close to any of the other Order members. That left Percy Weasley, but she doubted that he would want to do her any favours. Percy still hadn't made any move to speak to his family, and even if he had, Hermione wasn't as close to the Weasleys as she had been even a year ago. The thought made her smile grimly. Somehow, her

wizarding world family had narrowed to just Harry and Ginny in such a short amount of time.

With a sharp shake of her head, Hermione forced herself to stop thinking about such depressing things and decided that she would owl Tonks. The young Auror was her only chance, and she would have to hope that the woman would be able and willing to put herself out on the line for the sake of helping Harry. She fetched a fresh piece of parchment and a quill and began contemplating how she would word her letter. It would have to be short, but she'd need to make sure that Tonks understood how important this was. Finally, she dipped the quill into a bottle of ink and started writing.

"Tonks, I need to ask you for a favour. Down in the Department of Mysteries there was a room where there was a container filled with brains. I need the list of whose brains were in that tank. Ron was attacked by one of them during the Battle, and I think that has something to do with everything that has been happening. I know it's a lot to ask, but I NEED to have that list. Please answer as soon as you can, and don't tell anyone about this letter or the contents. Thanks, Hermione."

It wasn't the best of letters, but it would do. Hermione folded it neatly and stood up, gathering the books on the table together. She put a few of them into her bag and tucked it over her shoulder as she quickly left the library, heading for the Owlery. Harry had once told her that she could borrow Hedwig whenever she liked, and even though she knew that he'd been expecting her to send letters home to her parents, she also knew that he wouldn't mind if she borrowed Hedwig for this one task. If Tonks could get them that list, it would answer a heck of a lot of questions about just how someone had been able to use the Imperious Curse to get Ron to break a family bond. Not all of their questions would be answered, but it'd be a start, and that was more than they had now.

She didn't see any other students on her way up to the Owlery, much to her relief. Her mind had been spinning all night as she tried to figure out what to do about Ron, and it didn't help that Lavender had kept asking every two seconds whether or not she and Ron were breaking up. On the one hand, Ron had clearly been under the curse from Worrac, and so he hadn't actually chosen to attack Harry. But on the other hand, he'd been pleased with his actions when the curse wore off. He hadn't shown any regret or remorse that his ex-

best friend was bleeding to death on the floor in front of him. Not even the concern of a basic human being! No matter what she did, she'd never forget the little smile on his face, or the callous way he'd talked about how his spell hadn't "done much damage".

"Even a little damage was too much," she whispered, wiping eyes that smarted on the sleeve of her robe. A week or ago, she had foolishly convinced herself that she wouldn't have to choose between Ron and Harry, but now she was beginning to realize that was little more than a pipe dream. If the circumstances didn't force her to chose, Ron would. How was she supposed to pick between her boyfriend and the boy she'd come to love as a brother? It was impossible.

Hermione pushed the door of the Owlery open and stepped inside. "Hedwig," she called out softly, a little hitch in her voice. Soft hooting alerted her to Hedwig's presence seconds before the white owl alighted on her arm. Golden eyes peered into Hermione's face, and she could have sworn that Hedwig was absorbing the sight of her swollen eyes and tearstained cheeks. Then the owl leaned forward and carefully took hold of a strand of her hair, tugging it gently. She hiccupped and fought the urge to burst into tears.

"T-thanks Hedwig," she whispered with a shaky smile. Hermione didn't have many friends in the castle, so it was hard for her to confide in anyone about the situation. Harry and Ginny were both too close to what had happened for her to be able to talk with them objectively, especially when both of them had broken bonds with Ron, and she wasn't close to Lavender or Parvati. She sighed, running a hand that trembled a little through her hair. "I just wish this wasn't so hard, you know? I never thought that I would have to choose between Ron and Harry, and honestly, I don't know what to do," she confided to the owl. "I don't have anyone to talk to and I can't stop thinking about it. It's keeping me up at night so I'm so exhausted that my head actually hurts!"

Hedwig gave a sympathetic hoot around the tendril of hair in her mouth and tugged again. Then she released Hermione's hair and stuck her leg out. Hermione chuckled softly and tied the parchment around Hedwig's leg as carefully as she could. She spent a moment stroking Hedwig's soft feathers and whispering compliments as the owl preened under the attention before she carried Hedwig over to

the window. "This has to go to Tonks as soon as you can find her, alright? Please wait for an answer."

With an affirming hoot, Hedwig launched herself into the air and made a couple of loops in front of the window before she soared into the air. Hermione leaned against the window frame and watched until she couldn't see the beautiful white owl any longer. Much as she adored Crookshanks, sometimes she thought she had made a mistake in not getting an owl. There was a deep bond between Hedwig and Harry that she often felt envious of. But then again, Hedwig was truly one of a kind. She smiled faintly and turned away from the window, not even bothered by the fact that her robes were now streaked with owl dung. Until Tonks came back, she wouldn't be able to go any further, and in the meantime, she thought she might stop by Gryffindor Tower to change and then keep Harry company at the match.

NIR

Tonks was sitting behind her small desk at the Ministry of Magic when Hedwig arrived. Although there was a stack of parchment in front of her several inches high, she was thinking about Remus instead of working on the reports. He'd been distant ever since he returned from his mission with bad news, and she knew that the last full moon had been particularly rough on him. Every night he went to bed a little earlier, and every day he got up a little later, but she didn't think he was sleeping well. On the few occasions she'd slept at Grimmauld Place, she'd paused outside of his door on the way to her bed, and heard the whines and restless cries coming from within. Sometimes she'd been tempted to go in and wake him up, but she always lost her nerve at the last minute.

Sighing, she leaned back in her chair and looked at the ceiling with a wistful expression. She liked Remus a lot, and she'd had no qualms about letting everyone know. He was quiet and gentle, but still passionate about everything he did. The fact that he was a werewolf had never bothered her. His polite demeanour had attracted her from day one, as he'd been one of the few people not to laugh at her when she tripped over that damn umbrella stand. But she was slowly coming to terms with the fact that there would probably never be anything between her and Remus. Molly Weasley had sat her down two days ago and delicately explained that werewolves mated for life. The Weasley matron had said no more, but Tonks could take

a hint. Remus already had a mate, though Molly hadn't said who it was, and that meant there wasn't room for Tonks.

"Life sucks," she said to the ceiling, pouting a little. In the next instant, she yelped and flailed as her chair tipped over backwards and sent her sprawling across the floor. Fortunately, her co-workers were so used to the sounds of crashing coming from her office that no one came to check. She wouldn't have wanted anyone to wonder at the fact that Harry Potter's owl was sitting on her desk, calmly grooming herself and peering down at Tonks with an expression that, on a human, would have been vaguely amused.

"What are you doing here?" Tonks asked, hauling herself to her feet with a grunt. She righted her chair and then patted the pockets of her robe, realizing that at some point during the fall, she'd lost her wand. It only took a moment to spot the gleaming length of polished wood against the far wall. With a sigh, she retrieved it and sat back down in her chair, absently polishing the dust away with the hem of her robe as she looked at Hedwig. There was a small piece of parchment attached to Hedwig's leg, and obviously it was meant for her. Why in Merlin's name would Harry be sending a note to her?

Puzzled, Tonks set her wand down and un-tied the note. She cast a quick spell with her wand, creating a little dish for Hedwig and filling it with water. The owl made an appreciative sound as she drank noisily while Tonks skimmed the letter. Her lips drew into a frown as she absently reached into a drawer of her desk and pulled out a little package of owl treats, which she kept especially for the few owls that would accept treats from her. Hedwig daintily plucked a treat from her outstretched fingers and gulped it down. Tonks continued to feed her, her eyes still locked on the letter, mind working furiously.

In spite of the image she gave off, Nymphadora Tonks was not a stupid girl. Clumsy, yes, but she'd graduated at the top of her Auror classes, and not just because of her unique ability. She had the tendency to notice things that normal people missed, and she wasn't above going out of her way to keep herself informed on the important things that were happening in the wizarding community. Things like Ronald Weasley's recent behaviour, and everything that mess had since caused. If Hermione Granger was writing to her for information on the Room of Thought, then there had to be a reason for it, and she highly suspected that Ron was the reason.

"Hmm... interesting," she mused to herself, tapping her fingers on the desk. She'd been there when the students had given their account of what happened at the Department of Mysteries, but their tale had been flimsy and full of holes. Shock and exhaustion had set in, preventing Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Luna and Neville from correctly remembering most of the events of the night. Much of what they had said had later been proven false due to evidence collected from the Ministry. Certainly, there had been no mention of the Room of Thought, though she recalled hearing a report about how the brains had escaped. And Ron Weasley had been hustled off to Madame Pomfrey awfully quickly after the fight...

A slow smile crossed Tonks's face, and she picked up a quill to write a quick response to Hermione. She fed one last treat to Hedwig before tying the parchment around the owl's slender leg and sending her on her way. It would be difficult to procure that kind of information - Aurors, particularly beginning Aurors like herself, didn't really have that much clearance in the Ministry, and if anyone found her snooping around the Department of Mysteries, it could easily get her fired. The Unspeakables had been extremely touchy about their space since the Battle, and they were still working on getting things back to normal after all of the destruction. If Hermione's request had gone to anyone else, they probably would have said no and advised the girl to stop looking before she got into trouble.

But Tonks was not a regular witch; she had a few extra abilities at her disposal that could go a long way towards procuring what Hermione wanted. Plus, it would get her out of the boring paperwork, and that made the trip a worthy one right there. Grinning, she stood up, slipped her wand into the regulation holder, and sauntered over to the door. She pushed it open hard, allowing it to bounce off of the opposite wall with a resounding crash. What a lot of people didn't seem to understand about stealth work was that the more unnoticeable people tried to become, the more attention other people would pay to them. But on the other hand, the more normal a person acted... That's why she didn't try to hide her departure from her office, and she called out many cheerful greetings to colleagues and friends as she sailed down the hallway.

Inside the nearest bathroom, Tonks looked into the mirror and summoned up the power that always fizzled right under her skin. She watched her features morph into a more non-descript witch with short black hair, blue eyes, and high cheekbones. Marigold Turner,

one of the Unspeakables who actually had permission to be in the Department of Mysteries. She'd called in sick for most of that week, but everyone knew that Marigold was a notorious gossip who couldn't stand to be away from work for that long. It would surprise no one if they saw her snooping around after hours, and most people would chalk it up to her trying to find out news after the work day was over. With a flick of her wand, she changed her plain Auror robes into one of the periwinkle blue robes that Marigold generally wore. Perfect.

Casually, Tonks strolled out of the bathroom and made her way to the elevator, ignoring those who stopped long enough to greet her. Marigold was also a well-known snob, who considered herself to be above the Aurors because she was an Unspeakable, and her work was generally classified; she wouldn't return a greeting from a lowly Auror. That was what most people never understood about being a Metamorphmagus. It wasn't just as simple as making herself look like other people. It required real talent to be able to act the part as well so that no one grew suspicious. She'd gotten good at watching people and unconsciously picking up on their mannerisms, and after so many years of practice, she was an excellent impersonator. Not a single person looked at her strangely as she rode the elevator all the way down to her destination: the floor beneath the Department of Mysteries, where the Unspeakables kept their classified records.

Smirking broadly at how easy this was, she was in and out within less than five minutes, a fresh copy of those names tucked securely into the waistband of her underwear. She knew that Hermione would be eagerly awaiting her letter, but she was going to hold off on sending it for a little while, yet. That list of names had to be important for a reason, and she wanted some time to study it before she sent it off to Hermione. It was no fun being left out in the dark of things, and because she was just an Auror, that was often exactly what happened. There was no way she was going to let her chance to find out more slip by.

NIR

Harry was released from the Hospital Wing at the very last minute, about half an hour before the game would begin. Madame Pomfrey had been seriously contemplating trying to keep the boy there, but one look at his determined face had her giving in. She knew that it was asking a lot for Harry to keep from playing in the game, so

preventing him from going to watch would have been like asking Voldemort to stop trying to kill muggles. Impossible. So when Hermione showed up at the doors to escort Harry to the pitch, she watched to make sure that Harry swallowed his last pain potion and then allowed the two of them to leave without protest.

"Finally!" Harry said the second they were both outside. "Quick, let's run, before she changes her mind."

Hermione laughed and allowed him to enthusiastically drag her down to the pitch, where the stands were filling up quickly. They found a spot at the very top of the Gryffindor side, where they would have an excellent view of the whole pitch. Harry fidgeted, watching the pitch with keen eyes. Katie Bell had come to visit him in the Hospital Wing and explained that Ginny would be filling in as a Seeker. It was easier to find a Reserve Chaser than a Seeker, and Ginny was the one with the most experience. He had every confidence that Ginny would perform wonderfully. She was highly skilled, after all – most of the members of the Gryffindor Quidditch Team were. But it was harder to just sit there and watch as the game began than he'd guessed it would be. Sitting there watching, knowing there was nothing really stopping him from joining in except for the gash on his arm, felt so completely wrong that he wanted to scream.

"Harry, please," Hermione whispered at one point. "I can't concentrate."

"Sorry," he muttered, doing his best to sit still. It didn't help that Ron was participating in a game for the first time. He gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to join in the cheering from the Slytherin section as Ron allowed the Quaffle to go by him for about the twentieth time. Even from their position, he could see his formerly best friend's face turning bright red. Whether it was from embarrassment or anger, he couldn't tell. "Bloody hell. I don't think it would make a difference if I were out there. What's Weasley doing?"

"He's nervous," said Hermione, sounding mortified. She groaned and leaned over, pressing her face into Harry's shoulder. "I can't watch anymore. Let me know when it's over."

She didn't have a long wait. The game was over within the first hour, after Ginny caught the snitch just to end things before it got too

embarrassing. Harry grimaced at the sight of the score. Even after Gryffindor caught the snitch, they still lost, 170 to 300. He couldn't help scowling as Ron landed on the ground and stalked off towards the locker rooms without so much as a word to his team. Looking miffed, Ginny glanced their way and signalled for Harry and Hermione to wait there for her before she followed, with the rest of the team in tow. Katie in particular was looking furious. Hermione sat up and sighed, combing her fingers through her frizzy hair.

"That was not pleasant to watch."

"It'll be even more unpleasant to live through," Harry said unhappily, imagining the next game. If they'd fared this well against Hufflepuff, he shuddered to imagine Ron playing against Ravenclaw or Slytherin. Hopefully Katie would come to her senses and replace Ron before then, because he couldn't see Gryffindor's chances of winning being very good otherwise.

Hermione opened her mouth to respond and was cut off by a soft hoot. Hedwig made a neat circle around them before landing on Harry's knee. She gently nipped at his fingers when he reached for the parchment tied around her leg and he smiled, switching to stroking her head affectionately when Hermione practically pushed him aside in her haste to get to the letter. Unfolding it quickly, she scanned the sheet and frowned, looking disappointed. Harry gave her a curious look as she crumpled the parchment and set it on fire. It burned to ashes that were swept away on the wind before she spoke.

"I had hoped Tonks might have the list of whose brains they were, but she said she'd get back to me," she sighed. "I'm going to go in, Harry. Maybe I can do a bit more research on the spell that Ron was struck with. I have the feeling I'm missing something, and if I can only think of it, I might be able to understand."

"Are you sure you wouldn't wait here with me?" he asked tactfully, unsure of how to tell her that she looked perfectly awful. Her face was pale, and circles were beginning to line the flesh under her eyes. He was pretty sure she'd drifted off once or twice after she'd leaned against his shoulder during the match. "The fresh air would probably do you good."

"No, I have a Potions essay due tomorrow I have to work on anyway," she said absently. "Good-bye, Harry."

"Bye," he said to her back, frowning deeply. He couldn't remember the last time that Hermione had left work unfinished until the day before, possibly because that had never happened in his memory. She was definitely working too hard, but focusing too much on the research with Ron. Unfortunately, he knew that she would only get angry if he tried to point that out to her. Few things bothered Hermione more than a problem she couldn't successfully work out, and she would only continue to agonize over the situation until she either figured it out or couldn't work on it anymore. Nothing he or anyone else said to her would change that. Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead, careful not to jostle Hedwig off of his knee. How had life gotten so complicated?

Hedwig hooted, distracting him from worrying about Hermione, and took off into the air as a shadow fell over them. Harry glanced up to see Ginny hovering above him, her hair damp and curling around her shoulders, dressed in jeans and a jumper instead of her Quidditch uniform. She was smiling, but he could see the fatigue in her eyes. The fact that he noticed startled him. When had the two of them gotten close enough for him to be able to notice small details like that? He smiled wryly to himself as he stood up and greeted her, thinking that at least some of the changes in his life were good ones.

"That was fast," he commented, looking up at her and squinting in the late afternoon light.

"I didn't want to stick around. Ron and Katie are having it out," she replied, guiding the broom a bit lower, so that she was more or less on the same level as he was. "She's furious about the match, and Ron's humiliated, so he's lashing out. The whole team took the world's fastest shower and escaped before either one of them could pull us into it. I figure they'll be at it for another ten minutes, at least."

"Smart." He nodded. "What do you want to do now?"

Ginny patted her broom. "I feel like flying. Want to join me?"

He gestured to his arm, trying to control the pang of longing that flashed through him. "Can't," he said with a shrug, concealing a wince. Even that small gesture made his shoulder throb, and fully

convinced him that even a short flight would probably be a massively bad idea. Madame Pomfrey wouldn't be impressed if he wound back up in the Hospital Wing so soon.

"Sure you can. Climb on behind me. I'll go slow. You won't have to hold on too tight that way," she suggested.

Harry eyed her, wondering if the broom could help their combined weight, wondering if he really wanted to go flying with someone else, wondering what Madame Pomfrey would do if she caught him. He'd never flown on the same broom with someone else before, but... why not? He and Ginny were friends, weren't they? "Alright, sure," he said before he could talk himself out of it. "Let's go."

He stepped forward as she brought the broom down and closer and slung a leg over the back. As it turned out, the broom bore their weight easily, though it was noticeably slower and more sluggish in responding as Ginny slowly urged it back up into the air. It was awkward trying to hold onto the broom with one hand, Harry discovered. Madame Pomfrey, much as he hated to admit it, had been right about his not being ready to fly. There was no way he would've been able to fly alone, much less play Quidditch. Being a seeker usually required having at least one hand off of the broom at all times, and he still couldn't close the fingers of his wounded arm without strong twinges of pain radiating through his shoulder.

"Alright?" Ginny called back to him, her voice just barely audible over the wind.

"Almost," he answered, projecting to make sure she heard. He scooted closer and wrapped his arm around her waist. Ginny stiffened and she breathed in sharply. Harry leaned forward and spoke directly into her ear. "Is this okay? Sorry, but it's kind of hard to hold on with just one hand."

"No, it's fine." She shook her head and leaned forward. Her cheeks were pink from the wind as she readjusted her grip on the broom. "Do you want to fly out over the lake?"

"Sure." It didn't really matter to him where they went, as long as he was flying. He rested his head against the back of her shoulder, realizing that her hair smelled nice. Like vanilla and... something spicier. The wind felt good against his body, and it occurred to him

for the first time how much he had missed flying for the sake of it. Ginny's body was warm against him, keeping him from getting too chilled, and her control of the broom was excellent. Hermione had once told him that she hated flying with other people, but Harry was discovering that he actually rather liked it.

They flew out over the lake, and Ginny dipped the broom, bringing them down close enough to the water for the tips of their shoes to skim the surface. Harry spotted a couple of mer-people darting away in fright and chuckled, pleased to see the creatures running away from him. He'd never quite forgotten their rough treatment during the Tournament. Ginny smiled and began making large circles, lazily allowing the broom to pretty much go wherever it wanted. She kept a light hand on the wood and leaned back against him, sending a surge of warmth through his core. Harry frowned slightly, a bit puzzled by the reaction, and chalked it up to the fact that she was wearing a heavier sweater than he was. He must have been a bit colder than he'd realized.

"Thanks, Gin," he said, knowing she'd be able to hear him easily now that they weren't flying so fast and the wind wasn't so loud. He looked out over the lake. The water had turned a myriad of colors ranging from deep red to a pale pink to a golden yellow and orange as the sun began to set. "I think I really needed this."

"Anytime," she replied, sounding a bit breathless. "It's nice to relax after that disaster of a game."

"You did the best you could," Harry pointed out. "I said to Hermione, I don't think it would've made a difference if I had been playing. Do you think Katie will replace Ron?"

Ginny considered the question. "Ron's a good Quidditch player, honestly. He was always pretty good at being a Keeper when we were younger. Blocked way more shots than he ever let in. If he can get over being so self-conscious, I think he'd be okay. Whether or not he'll be able to get over it before Katie gets fed up remains to be seen."

"I suppose," he muttered, wondering which would come first. At first, he'd been pleased to hear that Ron had gotten onto the team. He had hoped that it would be the thing they needed to bring their friendship back, but a few practices had made it clear that wouldn't

be the case. Harry wouldn't have been disappointed to hear that Katie had kicked Ron off of the team. Quidditch was one of the few things he still enjoyed, and Ron's presence wasn't helping.

"It's almost dinner time," Ginny remarked wistfully. Harry looked up and blinked, startled to realize that at some point, the sun had finished setting. The moon had risen, turning the water a beautiful silvery color. "Actually, I think it's probably past. D'you want to go in or stay out for a little while longer?"

Harry didn't even have to think about it. "Let's stay. We'll go down to the kitchens later," he said into her hair. For the first time in what felt like weeks, he was actually feeling pretty peaceful, and he didn't want the moment to end. He wanted to stay there with Ginny, making slow circles around the lake, forever.

Please review!

A/N: Thanks for the reviews. They brought up a point about something that I want to clarify, since a few people have asked me. This story is taking place during Harry's sixth year and Ginny's fifth year, meaning the summer has already gone by. Unlike a lot of HP authors, I chose to skip it. I hope that brings everyone to the same page, since some people seemed to think that this was taking place before the summer. Now that we're all clear, enjoy the last chapter of 2011. Happy New Year!

Harry's bed in Gryffindor Tower had once been something of a sanctuary to him. It was one of the few places in the world where he'd rarely been tormented, or looked down upon, or felt anything but completely safe. That had only changed a few notable times. Once, in his third year, when Sirius Black had attempted to break into the dormitories. A few times in his fifth year, when the Prophet had managed to turn some of his housemates against him. And now, when the person who occupied the bed next to his hated Harry's presence, but could be perfectly charming and friendly with the rest of the boys who shared their room.

He sat on his bed, legs crossed, with the curtains drawn firmly closed. He'd cast a shielding and silencing charm so often that the fabric had begun to absorb the spells. On his lap was one of the books that Ginny had given him, detailing how to meditate and what advantages it could bring to even the common witch or wizard. Over the past several nights, he'd spent a few minutes before going to sleep trying to meditate, and slowly but surely, he was beginning to see how helpful it could be. At the very least, it was beneficial in calming his mind before he made an attempt at sleeping, and usually afforded him a couple of hours of restful sleep before nightmares converged and kept him awake for the rest of the night.

Not visions, mind you. He firmly believed that there had been no reason to wake Ginny because he hadn't had a vision since that day before Hogsmeade. No, these were regular, run-of-the-mill nightmares that focused on the more terrifying things that he'd been forced to do over the years, like Voldemort's resurrection or fighting the man at the Department of Mysteries. More recently, ever since he and Ginny had begun growing closer, he'd started dreaming about the Chamber of Secrets. Sometimes he wasn't able to save Ginny, and she would die in his arms, and he'd wake up with her name on his lips and his throat aching from holding back the tears.

On those nights, he had to sit on his hands to keep from grabbing the mirror just to make sure that she was still alive.

"Bloody nightmares," he muttered to himself, too exhausted to feel any real malice. The last really good night of sleep he'd gotten had been the one he'd shared with Ginny in the Room of Requirement. He was half-tempted to go back to the Room and see if he could recreate it. Perhaps the chance of scenery had done him good, since he no longer felt safe in the Tower.

Almost as if in agreement with the thought, his scar throbbed, prompting a headache. Harry sighed and opened his eyes, giving up on meditating for the night. He didn't know how good he would have to be before Ginny would agree to move on to the next step, but he didn't think he was quite there yet. Wearily, he shoved the books down to one corner of his bed and then stretched out, allowing his body to sink into the soft sheets that had been changed by the house elves just that morning. There was so much to do that he almost hated the thought of spending time sleeping... and then he grimaced, realizing that he sounded exactly like Hermione.

His research wasn't going all that well. Harry didn't know much about the wizarding world, but he figured that if there were spells to disown people, there must have been spells to make people part of a family. That was what he planned to offer Ginny: the opportunity to become a Potter, and possibly a Black, in name, along with everything that came with it. He'd thought long and hard about it over the past several days, but every encounter with Ginny just made him that much more determined. Ginny was sweet but strong, confident but shy, hot-tempered but intelligent, and fast turning into one of his dearest friends. He wanted to do this for her, and not just because he was partly the reason that she had disowned herself in the first place.

She was... an enigma. Just when he thought he was starting to figure her out, she went and did something that completely surprised him. Furthermore, she understood him, having been one of the few people in the world to personally go up against Voldemort and live to speak about it afterwards. The fact that she was suffering because she didn't have a family supporting her bothered him to no end, and he wanted to rectify that. But not only that... he actually wanted Ginny to become a part of the Potter and Black families, at least until

she got married and took her husband's name. He thought that his parents and Sirius would have liked that.

But Merlin... that was harder to do than he'd expected. How did Hermione deal with doing so much endless research? It made Harry's head hurt, wading through all of those books. More than once, he'd nearly dropped the idea altogether. It was only the thought of having Ginny become a Potter that made him keep looking. He'd grown used to the idea now and he refused to give up on it, but he was slowly realizing that the research was more than he could handle on his own. Hermione had no time for it, not when she was driving herself crazy trying to find a cure or explanation for Ron's actions. There was really only one person he trusted with this sort of thing, and that meant he had to tell Ginny what he was planning.

Harry grimaced at the thought, wondering what she would think of it. Would she want to? What if she laughed at him or turned him down? He groaned and rolled over, burying his face in his pillow. Some part of him knew that he was probably just being foolish, and that Ginny would likely be very appreciative that he wanted to offer her something so precious, but he still couldn't help but worry. His scar throbbed again and he winced, rubbing at the spot with his fingers. Without thinking, he stretched, then jumped as one of his feet hit the books at the bottom of his bed and several of them slipped off.

Because of the silencing charm, he couldn't hear the loud thump. But moments later, his curtains opened to reveal Neville looking down at him. "Alright, Harry?" he asked.

"Sorry, Nev," Harry muttered. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"Is your scar hurting?" Acting as though he hadn't heard the brief apology, Neville stared anxiously at Harry's fingers as the boy unconsciously massaged the spot.

"No. Well, a little," he allowed, rolling onto his side. He caught sight of blue eyes and froze, amazed to see that Ron was watching him with a look that could have been considered concern had it been directed towards anyone else. Hardly daring to breath, he watched Ron realize that he'd been seen. The redhead scowled and snapped his curtains shut with a flick of his wrist when Neville started to turn

to see what Harry was looking at. Harry let his breath out in a rush. Had Ron been... worried about him?

"Shall I call Professor McGonagall?"

"What?" Harry blinked and looked away from Ron's bed. "Oh, no, I'm fine. It always aches a little at night. I'll be alright. I think I just need a good night's sleep." He gave the other boy a crooked smile. Neville smiled back and wished him a good night before scooping up Harry's books. After gently placing them at the end of the bed, he closed the curtains and, presumably, went back to his bed, leaving Harry alone.

"Yeah, a good night's sleep," he muttered with a sigh, wondering if he'd really seen what he thought he had. Closing his eyes, he lay back down, wishing that just once, he'd be able to sleep without worrying about a nightmare. Somehow, he didn't think that was going to happen. He was right.

NIR

Ginny folded her arms and stared with no small amount of amazed amusement at Harry Potter. He was sitting at one of the tables in the library, flipping through a book with a frustrated expression on his face. This was a situation that she would never have expected to run into. Harry was in the library, and Hermione was down on the Quidditch Pitch helping Ron with his training. Would wonders never cease? Highly entertained, and deeply curious as to what could have caused him to willingly be in the room he normally avoided at all costs, she slipped into the room and walked over to Harry, who was so absorbed in his work that he didn't notice her even after she'd sat down across from him. She eventually reached out and yanked the book down, causing him to jump in surprise.

"Ginny!" he exclaimed before hastily lowering his voice when Madame Pince's head popped up. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for you. I hardly expected to find you here, of all places," she said, giving him a curious look. "What's up, Harry? Normally you hate coming in here. Hermione practically had to hide your Firebolt to get you to do some research the last time you had an essay due. But now every time I turn around, you're in here with your nose

stuck in a book. Don't tell me you're turning into a female Hermione. I'm not sure Hogwarts can take two of them."

Harry's mouth twitched. He set the book down and leaned back, throwing his arms over his head in a full-body stretch before he rubbed his eyes and blinked tiredly. "I'm not researching for school. This is more of a private project."

She watched him expectantly. "About...?"

"Well..." He ducked his head, embarrassed, and self-consciously pulled the book towards him, tilting the cover so that she couldn't read the title. He mumbled something nearly unintelligible. Ginny's eyes opened wide and she stared at him.

"What?" she said breathlessly. "I think I heard you wrong. Did you just - "

"I'm trying to figure out a way to make you a Potter," Harry repeated more slowly, slowly turning a pale shade of red at her scrutiny. "I thought... I feel so bad, Gin. I know that you said you didn't make this choice just because of me, but I also know that it was at least partly about me. It doesn't seem right that you should be suffering like this, and giving you access to my accounts at Gringotts doesn't seem like enough. Especially when I know that you're reluctant to use them, no matter what I say," he added with a wry smile.

"Harry..." Ginny just stared, uncertain of whether she should be happy, angry, or just sad. On the one hand, she was thrilled that Harry was going through so much effort on her behalf, and that he actually wanted her to be a Potter. After all, that had been her dream for years, though this wasn't exactly how she had intended it to happen. But on the other hand, she didn't want to become a Potter out of pity, and she hated the thought that Harry was only doing this because he felt like he needed to make up for her choice in some way. Leaning forward, she put her hand on his. "Thank you, but – "

"Why does there have to be a but?" he asked, sounding exasperated.

"Because I don't want you to feel like you have to do this, that's why," she replied, hiding her smile. "Harry, please believe me when I say that I'm honoured that you would even consider making me a

Potter. I know what your family means to you. But... I'll be fine on my own. I can't help but feel like you're only doing this because you pity me."

Emerald green eyes rolled. "You're just like Ron, Gin, honestly."

"What?" Ginny sat back, startled.

"You are! Every time I used to try to do something for him, he would get all bent out of shape because he thought that I pitied him for not having any money or something stupid like that. I can't count how many fights that his pride caused between us, and you're now acting the same way." Harry looked distinctly unhappy. He pulled his hand free and fiddled with his glasses. "Gin, I'm not doing this out of pity. Yes, I feel guilty about what you did for me, but no, I don't feel like I have to do this or that you ever expected me to. You're my friend. I want to help you. Please, let me do this for you."

The breath had frozen in her lungs, and for a moment, Ginny had no response while she tried to remember how to breathe. You're my friend. Had Harry Potter really said those three precious words to her? "I..." she started and then had to stop so that she could swallow the lump that had formed in her throat. Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them back, knowing how uncomfortable Harry got around crying girls. "Harry... I don't know what to say."

"Say yes," he said instantly, pushing the book across the table. "I've been researching, and I think there's a way to do it. Unfortunately, all of these bloody books are written in some weird old language that I don't recognize. I was hoping that you could help me do some research."

Say yes. Like it was really that simple. Ginny searched his eyes, wishing that she had a way to know whether or not he was offering this for the right reasons. Merlin, she wanted to say yes. It was on the tip of her tongue to agree. But could she really be so close to him and know at the same time that he only thought of her as a friend? That would be a new, special kind of agony, worse even than what she was presently going through. She'd had a taste of it while the two of them were flying around the lake together, when Harry was holding her like a lover, yet thinking of her in the same way that he would Hermione. Was she willing to live with that if it meant that she would have a family again... that Harry would be her family?

He was still staring at her, and the longer she went without speaking, the more upset he became, though he did his best to hide it. Ginny watched the brilliant emerald green eyes cloud and felt lower than a snake. She knew that Harry had really put himself out there to offer this to her, and that, more than anything, was what finally prompted her to say it. "Yes."

"What?" His eyes widened slightly with surprise. "Ginny... you don't have to – "

"You offered and I'm accepting," she said stubbornly, pushing her lower lip out in a firm pout. It had always worked with her brothers and she could see that it had an effect on him as well. No matter how hard it would be, she would do anything to be a part of Harry's life. And if this was the only way she could be close to him... At least she would have a family again, and she'd have the chance to be there to support Harry no matter what. Besides, who knew? Perhaps this would be the way for her to get what she wanted the most.

Harry smiled hesitantly. "Are you sure? You were so uncertain before. I don't want you to feel like you have to accept. I understand if you don't."

Hearing him say the exact same words back to her solidified her decision. Just like that, her indecision and uncertainty melted away to be replaced with the knowledge that she made the right choice. No matter what happened, this could only be good, right? The two of them would grow closer and she would definitely be able to keep her promise to Sirius. She'd have a family name to support her, and Harry would have the benefit of having a family member who actually loved him. Ginny offered him a shy smile, suddenly feeling a bit nervous around him in a way that she hadn't in years, and looked down at the book. Her hair fell over her shoulders, hiding her face, and that helped.

"I'm sure," she said softly. "You... startled me, that's all. I wasn't expecting you to offer something like that. If you're really certain, then I would be touched and honoured to accept."

His smile became into a grin; the shadows disappearing like they had never existed. "Then I think we should begin researching

together," he declared, flipping the book around to show her. "Do you recognize this language?"

A single glance at the book confirmed that she didn't. "No, sorry," she said, watching his face fall. "It doesn't look familiar at all. Have you tried any translation charms?"

"Yeah, but all of them have come up empty. Most of them require you to know what language you're translating," he replied, looking somewhat disgusted. "Those that don't require that can't recognize it. Parts of it are written in Latin, and that's how I know that I think it would help us. But the rest of it..." He trailed off and shook his head. "I wanted to ask Hermione, because I was pretty sure she'd know, or at least know some charm that would work, but when she would want to know why. She's been so busy trying to help Ron that I feel guilty for bringing her into this."

"I know what you mean," she admitted, feeling worried for their friend. She'd seen the dark rings that steadily increased under Hermione's eyes, but she hadn't been sure how to approach the girl. Hermione would either find out what was going on or collapse. "Well, maybe we'll have to do it the old-fashioned way."

He looked at her askance and she concealed a smile as she stood up and went over to one of the shelves at the back of the library. Most of the students were unaware, but Madame Pince did have a few magical tome translators. All a witch or wizard had to do was write the word down in the book and it would be instantly translated into any language selected. The problem was, of course, that it was much slower than simply using a translation charm, but it was the best that they would get. She found one of the small, thick books at the very end of a rarely used shelf and picked it up, wrinkling her nose at all of the dust. It clearly hadn't been used in quite some time.

"What's that?" Harry looked doubtfully at the book as she set it down in front of him.

"It's a magical translator," she explained, sliding into her seat. Reaching over, she dragged the book he'd been looking at closer and flipped open the translator. A long list of languages showed up. She selected English and then carefully wrote down one of the unfamiliar words from the first book. The ink slowly faded away and was almost immediately replaced by the English equivalent, which

turned out to be "family", "relatives", or "blood-related". "See? It's a lot slower than using a charm, but I think it's going to be the best we'll get right now. Just be careful. Sometimes a word can have more than one meaning, and because we're translating it word by word, we might have to stop and figure out what makes the most sense."

"I so wish we could just ask Hermione," he grumbled, shaking his head. "I just know that she'd know a translation charm..."

Ginny suppressed a laugh. "We can start with this and I'll owl my..." Her throat seized and she coughed, grimacing, before she corrected herself. "I'll contact Bill and Charlie to see if they might know of a charm that will help. Bill's traveled to loads of different places, and I'm sure his work as a curse breaker causes him to face problems like this all the time."

Sympathy flashed over his face briefly before he glanced away. "I'll work on the translator for a while. You can start looking through those books if you want."

Grateful that he hadn't pushed the issue, Ginny reached out and picked up one of the books that he'd indicated. In spite of the visit from the twins and Bill, she hadn't heard from any of them since that day, and she couldn't deny that she was beginning to think that the severance of the bond might have had a larger impact than they had wanted to realize. No matter how much they might have wanted to remain close to her, it was difficult to care about someone when you couldn't really feel anything towards them. She lowered her head and opened the book in front of her to the first page with a quiet sigh. No matter how wonderful it would be to have a family again, it wouldn't be a replacement for everything that she had already lost.

For several minutes, the two of them worked in silence. Minutes became hours as the small patch of sunlight on their table gradually migrated from one side to the other. Ginny felt her eyes getting tired and had to stop, rubbing them hard with the palms of her hands. Her back was beginning to ache, and her butt had gone completely numb. She'd worked her way through three different books, and she hadn't found anything that sounded even slightly like it would work. Part of her was beginning to think that she didn't need to worry about whether Harry was doing this out of pity, because there didn't seem to be a way to do it, period.

"Harry, maybe we should – " She stopped abruptly, her expression softening when she saw Harry. At some point, his head had fallen to the table, and she could see that his eyes were firmly closed. A small puddle of drool had formed on the translator. Ginny held back a giggle and reached over, gently sliding the book out from under his head before she shook him by the shoulder. "Harry, wake up before you get us kicked out. Harry?"

The boy muttered some unintelligible and tried to shake off her hand, but she persisted until he opened his eyes and stared at her blankly. She smiled back and started gathering their books together, taking only the ones that seemed as though they would actually help. Harry sat up and blinked blearily as she took the books over to Madame Pince's desk and signed them out. Madame Pince gave her a few suspicious looks, clearly wondering why they were taking out books about adoption and bonds, but said nothing. By the time Ginny returned to the table, Harry's face was red and he gave her an apologetic look.

"Sorry, Gin. I didn't mean to fall asleep on you."

"That's alright. You seemed tired," she said gently. "Haven't you been sleeping well at night, Harry?"

He sighed and shook his head. "Nightmares," he mumbled, pulling his glasses off and cleaning them with a quick flick of his wand. "Wakes me up every night."

Ginny frowned. "I thought I told you to wake me up with the mirror!"

"You said for visions and I agreed," Harry corrected her, sliding his glasses back onto his nose. "If I woke you up for every nightmare that I had, you'd never sleep."

He probably had a point, but she still didn't like it. "Have you been sleeping at all?"

"About three or four hours a night," he responded, massaging the back of his neck and grimacing. Sleeping on a table wasn't the most comfortable of positions. "It's no big deal, Gin. I catch a few hours here and there during the day, so it all works out."

"I'm not sure that's how it really works," she muttered, but decided to let it go for the time being. Harry didn't seem to want to discuss it anymore, and she didn't know what to do to help him, anyway. Sleeping potions could be difficult and costly to brew, and she wasn't sure if Harry would be open to taking them, anyway. She sighed as he took half of the books from her. There were so many things going on that she didn't know how to solve! "How is your meditating going? Does that help?"

"I'm trying. I think it's helping a little," he answered, falling into step beside her as they walked out of the library. "You know, I've been looking into those books about animagus that you got from the bookstore, and it says meditation is one of the first steps to learning. Aside from the revealing potion, that is."

"The revealing potion?" she repeated curiously.

He nodded. "It's the potion you take that indicates whether or not you have an animal," he explained, lowering his voice when a couple of students walked by. "If you don't have an animal, it doesn't matter how hard you try. You lack the ability to become an animagus." Harry frowned at the thought. "Anyway, I thought that we could start making the potion and see what happens. A couple of nights ago, I wrote down a list of what we would need, and Neville gave me this Potions magazine where we can buy the ingredients. Some of them are kind of expensive, but that doesn't matter."

"You mean you're not going to use Snape's cupboard as your personal store?" she teased.

Harry's ears reddened. "Hermione told you about my fourth year, didn't she?"

Ginny laughed. "She might have mentioned a couple of interesting things, yes."

He shook his head and made a face at her. "Are you interested?"

"In becoming an animagus? Totally!" Ginny said with enthusiasm. Sirius had been so excited about the prospect of Harry, Ron, Hermione and herself becoming an animagus, and she'd been crushed when his death meant that he wouldn't have the opportunity

to teach them. Just talking about it made her feel closer to the man, and she hugged her books tighter, smiling. "Order the ingredients and we'll start the potion. Between the two of us, we should be able to do it. Are you going to tell Hermione?"

"Not right yet. I don't want to put anymore on her plate," Harry said quietly. "I'm kind of worried about her to be honest. She's going to drive herself crazy with this whole Ron thing. I know she wants to find the answer, but it's getting to be at the expense of her health."

"I know. Lavender told me that Hermione goes to sleep quite late now. Most nights, she falls asleep on top of a pile of books," Ginny told him. Part of her had wanted to keep the information to herself, but she knew that she couldn't do that. Harry was Hermione's brother in everything but blood, and he needed to know. "I think she needs to slow down, but every time I try to tell her that, she insists that she's just a few minutes away from a breakthrough. I don't know what to do."

"I don't think there's anything you can do," he said with a sad smile. The two of them walked through the doors of the Great Hall without pausing. Harry ignored the looks that swung his way. Ginny tried to do the same, but it still hurt when she caught the cold look that Ron shot her. It was clear that he still considered her to be something of a traitor for siding with Harry. They found seats at the far end of the table, almost directly in front of the professor's table, and far away from Ron. He sat down and placed his books beside him, making it clear that he didn't want anyone to sit there, and gestured for Ginny to sit beside him. That way, they could place their heads together and talk without worry of being overheard.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" she asked, turning her head towards him. It probably looked like they were discussing secret things. She felt her cheeks warm at some of the speculative expressions from other, curious students. "She won't... run herself into the ground or anything?"

"I don't know. Hermione's never been faced with something that she doesn't know how to solve," Harry said honestly. He picked up his fork and put a few slices of roasted chicken on both their plates. "Every time she tries to tackle something, she's managed to figure it out in one way or another. I guess we'll just have to hope that this time around, she can do the same."

She didn't like the sound of that, but Harry had a point. It wasn't like Hermione would allow them to help. The two of them fell into silence after that as they began eating their meal, but almost unconsciously, she continued to lean against him, their shoulders brushing every time she reached for something with her right hand or Harry his left. Harry, for his part, didn't seem to mind their closeness. He appeared to be unaware of the questioning glances that the other students were giving them. Both of them were oblivious to the purely dark look that they were receiving from the Hufflepuff table. But neither of them could ignore the shadow that fell over the plates, or the blonde girl that was standing right behind them when they looked up. Ginny's eyes fell on the green scarf around her neck as she spoke.

"Hello, Harry," Susan Bones said with a sweet smile. "I was wondering if you would like to go out on a date with me."

Please review!

A/N: Well, I was a little concerned about the reception that this story was getting, but after the two death threats from last chapter, I think I'm okay. Obviously I just wasn't providing the right incentive! Don't worry so much. I'm a big fan of happy endings, you know? I'm quite pleased with this chapter... It turned out a lot better than I thought it would. I just hope that everything is easily understandable; though I'm sure you guys will let me know if it's confusing. Enjoy!

Important Note: On Monday, I start work full-time. I know, this announcement thrills none of us, believe me. I'm going to do my absolute best to make sure I don't fall behind on updates, but consider this your second (and final) warning.

A heavy silence fell over the Great Hall. Or at least, that's what Ginny felt the reaction should have been. In reality, Susan's presence at the Gryffindor table had attracted very little attention, being that the Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors actually had the tendency to get on quite well together, so no one had really been looking their way when she asked Harry out on a date. Ginny, for her part, just stared up at her, taking in the long, dark blonde hair that bordered on light brown, the big caramel brown eyes, and that tidy little green scarf that had been tied neatly around her throat. Bizarrely, the only thing that went through her mind was that the Greengrass family had once been known for having Seers in the bloodline, and apparently the ability had not only manifested in Astoria, but was starting to leak.

Susan locked her hands behind her back, but surprisingly, she didn't seem nervous even though Harry had yet to answer her. She waited patiently, looking down at him and paying not the slightest bit of attention to Ginny. "I thought we could go for a walk around the lake," she added hopefully, giving Harry her best smile. "Since we're not allowed to visit Hogsmeade anymore. You seem like such a nice guy. I want to get to know you better."

As tempting as it was to just let Harry sit there in a stunned silence, Ginny eventually sighed and jabbed the boy in the ribs. He jumped and burst out, "Yes."

Fuck. That hurt. Ginny winced as Susan's eyes lit up. "Really?" she asked excitedly, looking like all of her dreams had come true at once. "Wow. I never expected that you would say yes."

Harry blushed and shifted uncomfortably. He didn't seem to know what to say. His experience when it came to dating was extremely limited, considering that he only had the Triwizard Tournament's dance and the brief time with Cho to fall back on. "I don't mind going for a walk with you," he said at last.

"Great!" Susan smiled brilliantly. "How about tomorrow? One of my friends had to visit the Hospital Wing today, and she heard that Professor Astrum has to cancel the defence club meeting because he's not ready to be released. Apparently he had an allergic reaction to whatever that potion was. We could meet right after classes are done at four. Maybe by the front doors?"

"Sure." Harry nodded. "I'll see you then... Susan."

She nodded, her cheeks flushed with happiness. Ginny caught her eye as she turned to walk away and knew that she wasn't imagining the triumphant look that Susan shot in her direction. It was more than enough to make her fume silently as she swung back to her meal and started violently sawing at the piece of roasted chicken that Harry had put on her plate. He turned back as well, poking at his food with a weird look on his face. A look that, if she hadn't known better, she would have guessed meant he was a bit infatuated. Shit! Her dream of becoming anything more than just a friend or family member to Harry was going up in smoke, and it was all thanks to a particularly brave Hufflepuff. Figures the only brave one would be the one who had her eyes on the Boy-Who-Lived.

"I didn't know you and Susan were friends," she said at last, forcing herself to keep her voice light.

"We're not. I don't really know her that well at all. She was a member of the D.A. last year, but other than that, I've only really seen her in classes," Harry replied, lifting a forkful of potatoes to his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully and swallowed before adding, "I've never thought about her in that way before, to be honest. I wonder why she wants to go out with me?"

Ginny stared at him, wondering how it was possible for someone so intelligent to be so utterly clueless. It never ceased to amaze her how Harry really couldn't see the wonderful qualities that he possessed. Even if he was just a regular person, without the fame and a ton of money, he was warm, caring, and so sweet that it was a

miracle that girls weren't throwing themselves at him left and right. Of course, the reality of the whole 'Boy-Who-Lived' thing would be a deterrent for a lot of girls, but she suspected that Susan wasn't one of them. Anyone who joined the D.A. had to have at least some nerve.

"Harry, you're bloody well perfect," she said finally. He looked over at her, startled. Ginny fought the urge to look away and forced herself to look straight into his emerald eyes. Maybe nothing would come of the date between he and Susan; Harry might not even like her. "I can't imagine a reason why a girl wouldn't want to go out with you."

He snorted and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right. I just can't imagine why someone wouldn't be interested in a boy like me," he said sarcastically. "Between the temper, the hero complex Hermione insists I have, my crap grades, the fact that I've apparently gone dark... and oh, did I forget to mention the evil dark lord out for my blood?"

"Now you're just putting yourself down for no reason," Ginny said, grabbing a roll and buttering it with angry strokes. "Forget Voldemort. He's out to kill everyone and someday he won't even be a problem. There is so much to you that you can't even see. Any girl would be bloody lucky to have you. Frankly, I can't believe no one has asked you out before. For Merlin's sake, you asked me to be a part of your family! You gave me access to your vaults! Do you know how many guys would never think to do something like that? You're different than the others, Harry. You're so much better."

"Ginny?" He was staring at her, surprised.

Realizing that she was starting to speak a little too loudly, Ginny turned away from him and sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I'm sorry. I hope you have a fun time with Susan," she mumbled, rising to her feet. "But I have to go. I forgot that I have to... do something." She scooped up the books she'd borrowed from the library and escaped from the table, ignoring the sound of Harry calling after her. He sounded completely confused and she didn't want to risk talking to him anymore, not when she desperately needed to be alone for a little while.

"Hey. Ginny. Wait!" Footsteps rushed after her as she left the Great Hall, stopping her before she got the main staircase. Ginny sighed, turned, and saw Hannah walking towards her. "Please, wait. I'm sorry. I tried to talk Susan out of it. She doesn't understand. She said that Harry isn't with anyone so he's up for grabs."

"It's okay. How could she know? And she's right, after all. It's not like Harry belongs to me or anything." Ginny made an effort to sound light-hearted, but she suspected that Hannah wasn't fooled, judging by the look on the girl's face.

"God, Ginny. I'm sorry. I didn't think..." Hannah reached out instinctively and then paused, seemingly realizing that her comfort would not be welcomed, before her hand dropped back to her side. "Maybe the two of them won't get together. Susan hasn't dated anyone for a long time. She's still kind of hung up on this guy she met over the summer. It might not go anywhere... You've still got a chance, you know." The sympathy in her face was hard to take.

"Thanks, Hannah. Look, I have to go, okay?" She turned away, tears stinging her eyes, and hurried up the stairs before she broke down. Hannah was one of her closest friends, but she didn't like crying in front of anyone. She knew that she should go back into the Great Hall and apologize to Harry, because no doubt he was confused as to why she had basically run away from him. It wasn't really his fault that he couldn't see himself the way other people could. He had no idea why a girl would be interested in him. But that's exactly what made it so damn frustrating!

"Ouch!"

"Oof!" Ginny gasped as she was thrown back against the wall and her head smacked against the bricks. Stars burst painfully in front of her eyes. She'd been moving so quickly that she hadn't noticed someone else was rounding the corner at exactly the same time that she was. Gingerly rubbing the back of her head, she looked across the hall and spotted Hermione sitting on the ground a few feet away. Books and parchment littered the floor around her. "Hermione? Are you alright? Sorry, I wasn't watching where I was going."

"Ginny?" Hermione looked up in surprise. Her expression quickly became one of concern when she saw the absolute misery on Ginny's face. "What's wrong?"

Ginny sighed. Eyes like a hawk, that one. "Susan Bones asked Harry out and he accepted."

Hermione's jaw literally dropped. It was kind of amusing to watch. "She what? When?"

"At dinner, just now." Kneeling, Ginny began collecting and sorting through the mess. She felt a bit calmer now, like the collision had jolted her emotions back into place. The urge to find somewhere quiet to cry was no longer overwhelming. "I think it surprised him more than anything. No one has asked him out since Cho last year."

"And for good reason," Hermione said, sounding kind of upset. "I don't know that Harry is ready for that sort of thing yet. He has so much on his plate. I can't believe he said yes." She began to help, piling the books beside her.

"Can you blame him? A pretty girl asked him out. Why would he say no?" Ginny said, glancing at a few of the papers. It was all research detailing different kinds of spells that showed up as an orange light when emitted from a wand. She wondered if Hermione was any closer to finding the right one. "Anyway... I was just heading back to the Tower. Where were you going? Dinner?"

"I was going to stop by the kitchen, actually," Hermione replied, climbing to her feet. She winced briefly, placing a hand on her lower back. "Ouch, that hurts."

"Need a visit to the Hospital Wing?"

"No!" Hermione's reply was immediate and vehement. "Merlin, no. I've had enough of that place to last me the rest of my time here. I'll be fine. Will you be okay?" She cast a searching look at Ginny. "It must be upsetting to have someone ask Harry out just when the two of you are starting to get closer. If Harry is dating someone, he won't be looking at you like that."

Ginny grimaced. Talk about hitting the nail on the head! Hermione might have been researching herself into exhaustion, but clearly her brain was still at full function. "I think I blew it out of proportion, to be honest. I was really angry at first and I left him sitting there in the Great Hall without explaining things. He must think I'm crazy." She

stared down at her hands, feeling guilty. Except... it had been so easy to think that something might happen between her and Harry. For a little while, she'd had more hope than she'd had in years. A lot of that hope had just died a painful death. It hurt. A lot. And she couldn't explain that to Hermione, because then her friend would want to help them do the research for the family spell, and neither she nor Harry wanted to put that on Hermione's shoulders.

"I wouldn't be too worried. I'm not sure that it will last. Susan is a very nice girl, but I don't know that she has what it takes to stand beside Harry," Hermione said thoughtfully, picking up her bag.

"She could. She was a member of the D.A. and her aunt is in the Ministry. I've heard she's very politically-minded," said Ginny, who was beginning to feel a little silly. Was she really standing in the middle of the hallway, discussing the merits of a possible girlfriend for the boy she was in love with? This situation was just too bizarre, and she shook her head. "I'm going up to the Tower."

"I'll come up and join you as soon as I get something to eat. I think I might be on to something." A slow, satisfied smile spread across Hermione's lips, though she didn't look overly happy. "I don't want to talk about it too much here, but I think that the spell had a bigger effect on Ron than we realized. If it's the one I'm thinking of."

"Change of plans, then. We'll go to the Room of Requirement," she suggested. "There's not really anywhere we can go in the Tower to talk. Harry can't get to the girl's dormitory, and he shares a room with too many guys, including Ron, for us to be able to talk there. You get Harry and I'll wait for you guys up there."

Hermione nodded. "Alright. And Ginny?" she added when the redhead turned to leave. Ginny paused and looked back at her. "Look, I know that this is upsetting you more than you want to admit. That's understandable and I hope you'll come talk to me if it ever gets to be too much. I'll always be here to listen, no matter what else is going on. But I also just want you to know that it could all be over with if you would just tell Harry the truth. Something tells me that Harry might react a lot more favourably than you think."

Ginny just looked at her without saying anything for a long moment. Hermione had a point. Of course she did. Harry was under the impression that Ginny didn't see him as anything other than a friend

thanks to Hermione telling him that Ginny had 'given up on him'. He was just dense enough about matters of the heart to not realize that giving up on someone was not the same as not loving them. It would be easy to go back down to the Great Hall, sit Harry down, and explain to him that she was in love with him and could he please not date Susan right in front of her? It would also be nothing short of terrifying. She was finally becoming closer to Harry, which was something she had longed for since she was ten years old. Even if it was just as friends. If her confession changed things between them for the worse... if things were to become awkward or distanced between herself and Harry... she didn't know what she'd do. That was a risk that she couldn't afford to take.

"I can't..." she said softly, her golden eyes wide. "Hermione... I... I'm not... I'm not that brave."

"I think you are," Hermione replied just as quietly. "But if you really want me to not say anything, I won't. Just as long as you realize what might happen. If you think you can live with the consequences..."

"I do." Without giving Hermione a chance to say anything else, Ginny spun on her heel and continued hurrying down the hall towards the stairs. She didn't want to hear a lecture on how foolish she was being when it came to Harry. Hermione didn't understand, especially now that she didn't know about Ginny becoming a part of the Potter family. That was not something she was willing to risk giving up... even if it meant that Harry would keep dating other people.

NIR

Moments after leaving Ginny, Hermione entered the Great Hall to find that Harry's date with Susan was the furthest thing from anyone's mind. Nearly everyone in the Hall, professors included, was staring openly at the Slytherin table, above which a large, sleek black owl was flying in a tight circle. She squinted at the owl, only vaguely recognizing it, but knowing instantly what the bulging red letter that was clutched in its talons meant. Someone was going to be getting a Howler, and a nasty one judging by the darkness of the red. That was unusual for Slytherin students. Most of them were purebloods who received their scoldings in private out of

consideration for the family name. No wonder everyone was watching.

The bird made one last large circle before swooping down closer to the table and dropping the letter... right in front of Draco Malfoy. Hermione's jaw dropped, and it took her a moment or two to close it. Surprisingly, Malfoy didn't appear to be all that shocked as he gazed down at the letter. If she hadn't known better, she would have said that he might have been expecting the missive. She watched as he reached out and started to rise, clearly intending to leave the Great Hall and listen to the Howler in a more private setting. He never got the chance. The instant that his fingers made contact with the stiff red paper, the Howler burst into motion, rising above his head and speaking in Lucius Malfoy's cold, commanding, and eerily calm voice.

"DRACO. IT HAS COME TO MY ATTENTION THAT YOU NO LONGER WISH TO SUPPORT THE MALFOY FAMILY IN ALL OF OUR ENDEAVOURS. WE HAVE GIVEN YOU NUMEROUS CHANCES TO CHANGE YOUR MIND AND FALL IN, BUT YOU HAVE CHOSEN TO GO AGAINST OUR WISHES EVERY TIME. WE ARE UNABLE TO IGNORE YOUR CHILDISH BEHAVIOUR ANY LONGER. YOUR MOTHER AND I ARE EXTREMELY DISAPPOINTED IN YOU AND HAVE MADE OUR FINAL DECISION. YOU ARE NO LONGER OUR SON. YOU ARE HEREBY DISOWNED AND DISINHERITED, AND YOU NO LONGER HAVE THE RIGHT TO REFER TO YOURSELF AS A MALFOY. DO NOT CONTACT US FROM HERE ON IN."

With the last word of that painfully short message, the Howler promptly tore itself to pieces, right in front of Draco's white face. He stared down at the remains of the crimson paper without saying a thing, looking shell-shocked. Astoria Greengrass rose hastily to her feet and came down the table, elbowing the other Slytherins out of the way. Without saying a word, she reached out and gripped Draco's arm, gently pulling the stunned boy over the bench and out of the Great Hall. The instant that the two of them were gone, shocked whispers broke out amongst the rest of the students. Up at the staff table, Hermione noticed that Professor Dumbledore suddenly looked very cheerful and pleased, while Professor Snape had a perfectly blank look on his face that could only mean trouble.

"Merlin," a voice breathed at Hermione's elbow. She jumped and twisted to see Harry standing right next to her. His face was pale as well. "I can't believe M - Draco's," He made a face at being forced to call the other boy by his first name, "father did that. What was he thinking?"

"Obviously there were some inner conflicts going on," Hermione said quietly. Her ears were still ringing a little from the force of the Howler. "Listen, Harry, are you done eating? I want you to come up to the Room of Requirement with Ginny and me. We need to talk about the curse that hit Ron. I think I might have figured it out."

Harry smiled wryly. "You sure Ginny wants me there? She seemed to be pretty upset with me."

Hermione eyed him for a moment without comment, longing to slap him upside the head and explain slowly and carefully that giving up on someone was not the same as not loving them. But Ginny had asked her to keep silent, and she would abide by the redhead's wishes, even if she thought – no, make that knew that her friend was making a huge mistake. Harry and Ginny would be perfect together, and they would complement each other in ways that no other girl could hope to match. The two of them were just so stubborn! There was no way Harry would ever make the first move. He had never even thought about Ginny in that way. And if Ginny didn't stop being so afraid, he never would.

"Hermione?" Harry was looking at her curiously, obviously confused by her continuing silence.

"Hmm? Oh, sorry, Harry. I guess I spaced out on you there for a sec," she lied, hefting the load of books in her arms. "You ready to go?"

"Did you eat?" he asked instead.

"I'll get something later," she said dismissively. She'd been hungry when she'd left the library, but between Harry's date with Susan, the new information on Ron, and Draco's disinheritance, food was currently the furthest thing from her mind. Hermione glanced around at all of the students who were gossiping and sighed. "I really don't feel like being right now. Can we just go?"

"Sure," he said, pausing just long enough to grab a few sandwiches. He made her take them even though she didn't want to, and only agreed to come along when he was carrying the books and she was nibbling on a chicken sandwich that tasted surprisingly good. Harry knew better than to make a comment about how much she was enjoying the meal and instead led the way up to the Room of Requirement in silence, where they found Ginny waiting for them.

"Hey," she greeted, sounding a little shy.

"Hi," Harry said, looking at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Look, Harry, I'm sorry," Ginny said, tugging the sleeves of her shirt down over her hands. "I didn't mean to get upset with you. I just hate how you put yourself down, and you don't even realize that you're doing it. Just trust me when I say that you're a great catch, and any girl would be lucky to have you."

"I'll take your word for it," he answered, sitting down on the couch. Hermione cast a subtle glance between the two of them, wondering if either of them had even noticed that Ginny's voice had shook during the last few words she'd spoken. Probably not. Heaving a sigh, she motioned for Ginny to take a seat beside him and then stood in front of her two completely dense, oblivious friends with her hands on her hips. For just a moment, she was tempted to give in and read them both a stunning lecture on how stupid they were being. It was only the slight pleading in Ginny's wide, golden eyes that kept a lid on her temper.

"Okay, like I said, I've been doing research on that curse," she announced, deciding to let the matter go for the time being. "Those books we got from Hogsmeade turned out to be just what I needed, and I'm pretty sure I know what that Death Eater hit Ron with. It's actually been used before during raids, but never with this sort of effect."

"What spell is it, then?" Ginny asked eagerly.

"It's very old, dark magic. The spell is used to turn a person's organs inside out," Hermione told them, frowning. She hadn't been too pleased when she found out what the curse was supposed to do, and judging by the horrified looks on Harry's and Ginny's faces, the two of them felt the same way. "Yes, we're fortunate that it didn't

work the way the Death Eater intended, or Ron probably would have died. From what I can tell, he both pronounced the spell wrong and performed the movements incorrectly. It's supposed to have more of a downward slash, you know..." Her hand twitched with the desire to show off.

"But that's not what it did, right?" Harry said. Hermione blinked and looked at him. "I mean, Madame Pomfrey said Ron had a bit of internal damage... That's why he was bleeding..." He touched the side of his mouth and shuddered.

"Correct. Some spells just don't work when you don't do them right. But others have the tendency to mess up, and bad," she said, pressing her lips into a thin line. Ron had told her once that the expression made her look like Professor McGonagall. The notion made her feel absurdly better. "In this case, and I'm only guessing here since there's no real information when it comes to screwed up curses, I suspect that it lowered all of Ron's natural defences and inhibitions. Kind of like he was really, really drunk, but even worse. That's why the brain was able to have such an effect on him. Normally, his body and his magic probably would have been able to fight it off... Or at least make it so that he wasn't quite so badly affected. But if what I'm thinking is right, thanks to the curse, his mind has been completely poisoned with the mind of the brain that touched him." She sighed. "We need to get that list from Tonks. I have to know whose brain that was. I'm absolutely certain that's the key."

Harry pondered the new information in silence for a moment before he asked, "What are the chances that Dumbledore or Madame Pomfrey could have figured this out?"

She thought about it. "Likely not high. Madame Pomfrey knew about the brain and the fact that Ron had been hit by a curse, but I don't believe she would have had sufficient information to figure out what the curse was. As it was, I barely had enough information to find it. But it's probable that they've come to the same conclusions about the brain as me."

"Which is...?" Ginny urged.

"I think that the owner of the brain and the person who cast the Imperious Curse on Ron were related," she said bluntly. "And a

close relation, at that. The magical signatures between members of an individual family are usually similar because you inherit aspects of your signature from your parents. So if, for example, the brain had belonged to Abraxas Malfoy, Lucius's father, and it had infected Ron's mind, Lucius or Draco could have come along and cast the Imperious... and because Ron's mind was no longer solely his own, they would have been able to force him to do things like breaking family bonds with no problems. The normal laws surrounding the Imperious wouldn't exist or apply. And because Ron's mind has been twisted and poisoned, some part of him probably did really want to break those bonds... and that's why the magic wouldn't have protested." Exhausted, she sank down on the chair that was behind her and rubbed the bridge of her nose in an effort to relieve the headache thrumming at her temples.

"Oh my god..." Ginny muttered. Her face had gone pale and there was a distinctly green tinge around her lips. She swallowed hard, pressing the tips of her fingers to her mouth. "No wonder Ron's been acting strangely. He's not really Ron anymore."

Hermione nodded faintly. "That's correct. It's likely that he didn't even notice it happening, and a medical scan wouldn't pick up on it because technically, nothing's physically wrong with him. Everything is mental." She tapped one side of her head and shuddered, glad that she was finally able to share the horror with someone else. "All of the scans that I were doing... None of them would have picked up on something like this."

"Is there a way to reverse it?" Harry asked.

"I don't know." Hermione looked discouraged. "That would probably be a job for the Unspeakables at the Ministry, and it might take them years. At the very least, separating the other mind from Ron is probably impossible at this point, because they've been joined for long. But they might be able to teach him how to identify the changes and deal with them in a more constructive manner." She stopped speaking, hoping that neither of her friends had noticed that her voice was quivering just a little. For once, figuring out what was going on hadn't helped. They were no closer to a cure, and it was a crushing disappointment.

Harry was watching her closely, but if he noticed that she was close to tears, he didn't mention it. "Maybe I'll write to Tonks and ask her to hurry up with that list," he said finally.

"I think that would be a good idea," she managed to get out as a tear slipped down her cheek. A bit horrified, she bit her lip hard and made to stand up. A soft touch on her hand made her pause when she would have otherwise fled the room. Ginny silently pulled her over and forced her to sit down between her and Harry. With all four of their arms around her, offering her more comfort and warmth than she'd felt in months, Hermione couldn't hold it in any longer. She broke down and wept.

Please review!

A/N: I'm glad everyone enjoyed the last chapter. I have had some complaints about the Harry/Susan thing from people who have said they dislike the whole jealousy aspect. Harry is not trying to make Ginny jealous. He got asked out on a date by a nice girl and accepted – he is a teenage boy, after all! I can tell you right now that his relationship with Susan will not last for very long. I'm hoping that I haven't caused too many people to give up on me, because that wasn't my intent in the slightest. I like to build my H/G relationships slowly, but it is coming. In the meantime, enjoy!

Important Note: Since I'm working now, updates may not always be on Friday. Occasionally they may be on Saturday instead, depending on how busy I am. As always, check my profile for updates, because I do post there regularly, and you will see information there if an update is late/cancelled for the week.

Astoria Greengrass perched on the edge of the bed and stared down at her hands, resisting the urge to look up. It was only polite to look away when a friend was trying to collect themselves. She knew that she wouldn't have been too happy if she had been crying, or even on the verge of it, and someone was hovering, so she made an effort to extend the same courtesy to others. Unfortunately, ninety percent of the students in Slytherin lacked those same manners. Several people had knocked on the door already, and she'd heard the whispered rumours slipping through the cracks until she lost her temper and cast a silencing charm. Had her partner been there, she would have been teased about acting like a hot-headed Gryffindor. The thought caused a small, pleased smile teased her lips as she finally glanced back up at Draco.

He was seated on the middle of his bed, his hands clenched so tightly into fists that he was likely doing damage to his palms. The unexpected missive from his parents had shocked him into a dazed silence that was only just beginning to wear off. It was likely the only reason that she was sitting inside the room with him, instead of locked on the other side with the rest of his so-called friends. She and Draco had never been overly close, and although she thought of him as a friend, she suspected that he probably didn't feel the same way. Not yet, anyway. Malfoys were not supposed to have friends. Only those who were beneath them. Fortunately, Draco was no longer a Malfoy.

"Are you going to sulk forever?" she asked, finally breaking the silence. She spun her wand between her palms, enjoying the feel of the wood underneath her fingertips, and rolled her shoulders to loosen the tension that had been growing between them. It had been a while since she and Ginny connected – they'd have to find some way to do that over the next couple of days.

Draco growled low in his throat and glared at her, silvery eyes flashing. "What are you doing in here?" he demanded, like he'd only just realized her presence. "Get out."

"No." Astoria raised her chin slightly, daring him to order her to do something else. Taking orders, doing things the way others wanted... she'd never been good at obeying authority. Daphne had once told her that it was a damned good thing that she wasn't the oldest child. It was probably the smartest thing that had ever come out of her sister's mouth. "You're being foolish, Draco. Hiding in your bedroom is only going to make them think that this hurt you."

"That's because it did!" he all but shouted. He was fortunate she'd erected the silencing charm already. "I have no parents, no money, no family. I have nothing!"

Violet eyes flashed. Astoria found herself standing and looming over him before she'd even registered that she was moving. "Nothing?" she hissed, biting the words out. "Are you dead, Draco? Do you have no pulse, no future? Because as long as you have those things, you have something, even if it's not what you had originally intended. Stop being so melodramatic for Merlin's sake! You're acting like a Gryffindor! No, worse..." She eyed him with poorly disguised disgust. "A Hufflepuff!"

His head snapped backwards like she'd reached out and slapped him. "What... You... How dare you..."

"How dare you?" she retorted, placing her hands on her hips. "Draco, you've been so involved with playing the Daddy's Boy that you've never actually stopped to look at what's going on around you. You're lucky that Lucius and Narcissa care enough about you to disinherit you instead of forcing you to take the Dark Mark. You've seen what the Dark Lord is capable of, and you know what you would have had to do under his command. That life would have killed you. The decision to free you may very well have killed your parents. This is

your chance to take the freedom that they've given you into your own hands and mould your future to whatever you want it to be. Yes, it will be hard. But sitting here moping is not going to help!"

For several seconds, he just stared at her, mouth opening and closing soundlessly as he struggled to understand her words. Astoria waited patiently, retreating a little and folding her arms across her chest. She was glad to be in Slytherin, but the house had become twisted over the years, and sometimes that meant she had to act more like a Gryffindor to get her point across. It was now Voldemort's plaything, a den for his little snakes that were just waiting for the chance to grow up and devour the world. Between herself and Draco, she was relatively confident that they could take Slytherin back and possibly even integrate it with the other houses – but it was going to require some work on both their parts. He had to be up to the task.

"Look," she said, purposely softening her tone. She sat down on the bed again, close enough to put a hand on his foot if she so desired. "I know this is hard. It's shameful and disgusting and makes you feel like you're not worth anything. But if you stay in here, then they're all going to know that you feel this way. They'll eat you alive."

"Why do you care?" he asked, a strange look on his face.

"Because you're my friend," Astoria answered honestly. "That word never meant anything to me until I found my best friend." Unwillingly, she smiled at the thought of Ginny and the fun that they'd had together. The redhead was both intriguing and vexing. "But now, knowing what it means, I will stand by you, Draco."

"Even if it means suffering the same fate?" Draco raised an eyebrow, clearly expecting her to say no.

"Yes." She knew that her answer shocked him. Family was extremely important to purebloods, possibly the most important thing of all. It was hard for her to say out loud that she would be willing to give that up, even if it was the truth. "I'm not going to follow Voldemort down that path, and you know that the Greengrasses support him wholeheartedly. I knew that this was coming, though I wasn't expecting it to happen so soon, and I've been preparing myself for this for some time."

He looked almost dazed. "I need to think. It's too much."

She could understand that, but... "You can't spend your time in here, Draco, I'm sorry. Why don't you go for a flight?" It was obvious that he would have liked nothing better than to curl up under the covers and spend the rest of the day there, but she was being honest when she said that the Slytherins would hold this against him. Draco had been the undisputed Prince of Slytherin for a long time because of his family. The fact that he had been disinherited did not bode well for his future, particularly if people caught on to the fact that it bothered him. "It's a gorgeous evening. I bet the patch is empty."

Draco blinked at her for a moment and then rolled off of his bed. Without a word, he retrieved his broom, put on his cloak, scarf, gloves and hat, and opened the door. Several younger members of the house looked up at him with startled expressions before scattering at the sight of his glower. Rolling his eyes, the boy stalked down the stairs and through the Common Room with his head held high, like he hadn't a care in the world. Astoria trailed behind him and found herself smiling as the passage slid closed behind him, causing the room to break out into soft whispers. If nothing else, the boy had a future as an actor.

"I just can't believe this. Thank Circe he and I were never married," Pansy Parkinson said with a shake of her head. "It would reflect dreadfully on my family."

"Imagine, not wanting to follow the Dark Lord. What is he thinking?" Daphne wondered, peering into her little compact mirror. She fluffed up her blonde curls before snapping the mirror shut and scowling. "No wonder Mr and Mrs Malfoy decided to disinherit him. Someone who can't even bring themselves to be a good child doesn't deserve the prestige of a family like that." Her comment had been delivered with a pointed look in Astoria's direction; she wouldn't bring up Astoria's actions in front of the whole house, but felt that the subtle dig was appropriate.

"Draco's always been a bit of a pansy," a seventh-year observed. "Bet he wussed out on the honour."

"Good!" declared a fifth-year. "He doesn't deserve it, then."

It took a considerable amount of effort to avoid rolling her eyes as Astoria turned her back on the room and climbed the stairs to her dormitory. Fortunately, her roommates were gone, meaning that she had the place to herself. After deliberately closing and locking the door, she moved over to the large window and gazed out. Though the Slytherin Dorm was located in the dungeon, all of their windows had excellent views of the Hogwarts grounds, as though they were actually in one of the Towers. Another wonderful use for magic, she thought, feeling pleased when she caught sight of a green-clad form crossing the grounds towards the Quidditch Patch.

In all honesty, it probably surprised few of the Slytherins that the Malfoys had disinherited Draco. Rumours had been going around since the beginning of the year that the Malfoy heir had refused to bow down to Lord Voldemort in place of his father. Voldemort had tortured and nearly killed Narcissa as a result of it. The woman had been left badly wounded and nearly in a comatose state for many weeks, until Lucius had been broken out of Azkaban. Her husband's presence had apparently given Narcissa the required strength to break out of the coma, but she had been a different woman since that time. No doubt it had been Lucius who had made the decision to disown Draco, not Narcissa, and whether or not he had really done it to protect Draco or because he was disgusted with his son was something that only Lucius Malfoy himself could answer. Astoria believed it was the former, but she knew most would assume the latter.

A quiet knock came at the door behind her, and then with the help of a few spells it opened, allowing the tall, curvaceous form to slip inside. "I wondered where you had gone," Daphne said, moving further into the room. She cast a distasteful look around, as though the neat state of the room somehow offended her delicate senses. "Astoria, really. This has gone on for long enough. Mother and Father are beginning to grow concerned. We are all weary with your actions. When will you agree to fall in line with the Dark Lord?"

"Never," Astoria said simply, turning back to the view. It was dangerous to turn your back on a Slytherin, but as long as they were family, Daphne would not harm her. "I told you that already, Daph. I'm never going to follow Voldemort."

Daphne winced at the sound of the name. "Do not call him by name! That kind of disrespect has gotten many older, more powerful

wizards killed," she hissed. "Honestly, Astoria. I don't know what's gotten into you, but ever since we came to Hogwarts, you've become a totally different person. I was so happy when you got into Slytherin, because I thought for certain that it meant you would be following our family's ways. But it's like you've become a stranger to me. Where did my little sister go?"

"Who? The vapid, spoiled, arrogant little twit?" she asked wryly, flipping her dark brown hair over one slender shoulder. Recalling how she had been as a child made her cringe, and it wasn't something she enjoyed being reminded of. Slytherins stuck together outside of the dungeon because of the animosity from the other three houses, but inside and in privacy was a completely different story. Her "pureblood" attitude might have been right according to her family, but it had also made her desperately lonely. What she'd disliked in herself, she'd hated even more in others. That was one of the reasons that had driven her to find friends in other houses. "She's gone, Daphne, and she's never coming back. Let it go."

Abruptly, Daphne approached and grabbed Astoria's wrist. "It's all because of that little bitch, isn't it?" she hissed. "I knew it was a mistake to keep letting you hang around with her, but I thought you'd grow out of it. I'm warning you, Astoria. Stay away from that redheaded cow or I swear, I'll tell Mother and Father everything. You'll regret it."

"If you're done threatening me, you can leave," she replied coldly, not letting on that Daphne's threat had affected her in the slightest. She and Ginny had kept their secret friendship from everyone except for Luna and Hannah, who were also a part of their little group. Not once had Astoria let on that in her second year, she had foolishly confided in her sister that she'd finally made a friend. She vividly remembered being utterly crushed when Daphne had reacted with scorn instead of happiness.

"Fall into line," Daphne said softly, her expression menacing. She was squeezing Astoria's wrist so hard that some of the bones had begun to creak in an alarming manner. "This is your last warning, understand?"

Astoria waited until Daphne had flounced out before she said bitterly, "Yeah, I understand too well." Gingerly, she rubbed her bruised arm, wincing at the feeling of the bones settling back into place. It had

taken her a while to be prepared for the eventuality of being disowned and disinherited, but she thought she had finally come to terms with it some time ago. She wasn't looking forward to being alone in the world, but there was no way she was going to lower herself to serving Voldemort. No matter what, Astoria Greengrass would never become a Death Eater.

NIR

Albus Dumbledore was sitting at his desk, sorting through some files, when the fireplace flared green, indicating that someone was coming through. He glanced up calmly and smiled in greeting as a rather dazed-looking Remus Lupin stumbled out and just barely caught himself on a nearby chair before he tripped and fell. His expression flickered slightly as he took in the dusty and torn clothes that were practically hanging off of the werewolf's too-thin body, but by the time Remus had recovered his balance and looked up, Albus was back to the genial smile that made people want to trust him. Swiftly, he rose and came around the desk with a hand stretched out in greeting.

"Remus, how have you been?" he asked softly, mindful of the fact that Molly had told him that Remus was suffering a headache nearly constantly now.

"I've been better, Albus," said the younger man with a weak grin. Even the little effort that it took to Floo appeared to have exhausted him, for he sank down into one of the chairs and allowed his shoulders to slump in a way that he normally would have abhorred. Albus felt a flicker of pity and, for the first time, regretted having not let Remus in on the truth sooner. He hadn't fully realized that the wolf's morning would have progressed so far.

"I'm sorry to have called you out of the house when you're recuperating from the mission," he said, acting like he was unaware of why Remus was suffering so much. "But this matter was urgent."

"Is there something wrong with Harry?" Amber eyes widened as Remus sat up straight, looking alarmed.

"No, no, I assure you that Harry is fine," Dumbledore said with a wave of his hand. "He has been handling this situation with young Ronald admirably. Although I do believe that he is both curious and

disappointed that you have not been in contact with him this year. I had told him that you were out on a mission for the Order, but..."

"Oh, well..." Slumping back, Remus avoided the keen blue eyes in front of him. "It seemed pointless to try to get closer to him... when I didn't know how much longer I'd be here."

It would have been easy to press for the real reason, but tactfully, Dumbledore didn't bother. "Well, my reason for asking you to meet with me is in regards to that very detail," he said with an air of cheerfulness. "I have someone that I would like you to see."

"It's not a Healer, is it?" Remus asked nervously. "Because, you know, they won't be able to do anything for me."

"You may see Poppy, but that's not why you're here," he replied, even though partly, it was. Madame Pomfrey had been pestering him about Remus for the last few weeks, ever since she'd gotten to talking to Molly Weasley while the woman was at the castle to deal with Ginny's disowning herself, and Molly had gone into detail over what Remus was going through. Having cared for the boy while he was younger, Poppy had developed something of an overprotective tendency towards him, and she was incensed to hear that Remus was suffering so much. Unfortunately, there was nothing that she could do, but that didn't stop her from wanting to check him over.

"Then why am I here?"

"Come along with me, and I'll show you." Dumbledore rose to his feet and swept out from behind the desk. He didn't need to glance behind to know that Remus was following obediently as he led the way down towards the Hospital Wing. It was late in the day, the time when most of the students were enjoying their free time at leisure after dinner, so the two of them met few people as they walked towards their destination. Those that they did pass didn't seem to associate the pale, lean man with the werewolf who had taught them a few years ago.

Madame Poppy Pomfrey was hovering over Professor Astrum when they walked in, her lips pursed. Astrum was awake and wearing an annoyed expression, just barely visible behind the sickly tinge that graced his skin. "You're not well enough to leave yet," she was saying sharply, her hands on her hips. "You had a violent reaction to

that potion, and it nearly killed you. I insist that you stay here until I can be sure that all traces have left your system. Have you any idea of how dangerous it could be if you ingested the wrong food or drink in the next few days? A reaction could still kill you – "

"Bloody hell, woman, I didn't come here to laze about. I came to teach," Astrum said, exasperated and swatting at Poppy as though she was a particularly aggravating fly. "I'm allergic to dragon liver. I've known that since I was five years old. It hasn't killed me yet and I very much doubt that it will."

"When you became a professor here, you agreed to trust your health to my hands!" Poppy practically spat, drawing herself up. Two spots of pink bloomed on her cheeks as she directed a lethal glare towards her patient.

"Poppy," Dumbledore said politely before she could continue ranting. The woman started and turned in their direction, blinking. Astrum went pale and sank back against the pillows. "I must ask for a moment alone with Professor Astrum, if you don't mind. I promise to keep him from getting out of bed."

"If you can do that, Headmaster, you may talk with him for as long as you like," she said with a long-suffering sigh, rolling her eyes. Muttering less than kind comments under her breath, she bustled off, heading into her office. The door closed behind her with a slam. Dumbledore cast a couple of charms at it, most notably for privacy, silencing, and distracting. That way, she would completely forget that they were even out there until he chose to remove the spells.

"What are you doing?" Astrum demanded the instant Dumbledore lowered his wand. "I didn't... I never said..."

"I am taking the decision out of your hands," came the calm reply. Dumbledore ushered the confused Remus into one of the seats beside the bed. "Since you are unable to leave the Hospital Wing, I have brought Remus to you so that you could tell him. I have already made the necessary changes to the debt you have sworn to me." A glitter of satisfaction shot through him when Astrum jerked back at the news. It took an extremely powerful wizard to be able to make a change like that, particularly in a case like this, so that Astrum would be able to speak freely about the events of that night to Remus. He'd altered the restrictions to include Remus, not only

out of pity, but also because it never hurt to have people be reminded of how strong he truly was.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," Remus said with honest confusion, glancing back and forth between the two of them. "Tell me what? Who are you? I don't believe we've met before."

Astrum's jaw worked silently for a few moments. It seemed as though he had lost the ability to speak – quite possibly a first. Finally, he leaned forward and placed a hand on top of Remus's. Remus frowned and started to say something before he stopped. His eyes widened slightly at what must have been a reaction from the wolf, and then his head snapped around to face Astrum with a look that was a cross between shock and disbelief. Dumbledore chose that moment to make his exit, knowing that neither of the two young men would notice him leaving. He wore a largely self-satisfied smile as he strode down the hall, heading back towards his office. Sometimes, there was just nothing like young love to make the world and his never-ending work seem worthwhile.

NIR

One moment he's in the Chamber of Secrets, kneeling over Ginny's small, slender and broken body, watching with horror as her breathing gradually slows until he can't hear it anymore. The next, the world twists and flips. Ginny disappears, and he finds himself watching the destruction of a small muggle village. There are black-robed figures everywhere, cruel shadows that blend into the dark night perfectly, with the only sign of their humanity being the white skull masks hiding their identities. Men, women, children, even pets: no one is safe. Everyone screams with pain, horror, and the oncoming death that they can't escape. Fire rages, destroying the carefully tended houses and gardens, and flashes of light sparkle through the air.

And in the middle of it, a madman stands, his pale skin gleaming in the dancing light. Crimson eyes look out over the village with unrestrained glee. Long, slender fingers clutch a familiar yew wand, and once in a while, when someone in particular strikes his fancy, he casts a spell that makes anyone sane who may be watching want to vomit. He particularly enjoys torturing the young children, who scream and cry the loudest when presented with something straight out of their nightmares, and seeing the way the parents fall apart

when they've watched the bodies of their beloved children hit the ground so lifelessly.

After what feels like hours, though it may have only been minutes, there is no life left in that small village. Bodies and random parts are strewn everywhere. Blood covers the saturated ground and runs freely into the sewers. The fires burn harder, brighter, hotter, consuming the damage. He smiles coldly, cruelly, taking delight in the carnage that has been brought. Without waiting for the command, one of the robed figures lifts his wand and casts a familiar spell. A jolt of green light flashes from the end of the wand, but it is not the killing curse. Instead, as he begins to laugh, the green light forms a well-known and feared symbol in the sky...

Harry jerked awake, his breath coming in short, sharp gasps. His whole body trembled as he sat up, staring sightlessly into the dark. The images of the vision played across the back of his eyes. So many innocent people who had never done anything wrong, dying in such unimaginable pain. His stomach cramped, and he felt a thick feeling rising in his throat. Quickly, he thrust the curtains aside and leapt out into the darkness of the room, fumbling for his glasses. None of the other boys stirred as he ran into the bathroom and threw himself at the nearest toilet, just in time for everything he'd eaten that day to come up violently. He hung over the porcelain and wretched, shaking so hard he had to hold on to avoid missing, until he was only spitting up water and bile.

"Fuck," he whispered, his throat aching as he spoke the single word. The grinning green skull was emblazoned in his mind, and he knew he'd never forget the way those poor victims had looked beneath the eerie emerald light. His stomach churned again at the memory and he groaned, struggling to his feet. There was a disgusting taste in his mouth, but he didn't stop long enough to brush his teeth. Instead, he staggered back into the dorm room and over to his bed, where he groped about for the mirror. A small voice in the back of his head was suggesting that maybe he shouldn't wake Ginny up, but he ignored it as he finally located the small silver disc under his pillow.

"Padfoot," he said clearly. His hands were trembling so badly that he had to brace them on his knees to be able to look into the reflective surface. Nothing happened for several minutes, during which his shivering intensified, but finally the mirror warmed beneath his fingers and then a sleepy Ginny was staring back at him. Her eyes

widened when she caught sight of him. Harry opened his mouth to speak, but nothing seemed to want to come out. It didn't matter.

"Common Room, now," Ginny ordered. The mirror went dead in the next instant. He dragged himself up and stumbled towards the door and down the stairs. Just as he reached the bottom, a light appeared from the girl's side of the stairs, and Ginny ran out. Her hair was a mess, and she was had thrown on a white cotton robe over her nightgown, though she wasn't wearing slippers. She rushed over to him, her eyes examining him quickly, a worried frown tugging at her lips when she saw his state. Gently but firmly, she ushered him over to the couch and urged him to sit, then took a seat next to him.

"It was a vision," he said without waiting for her to ask. "He was... There was a village... So many people, Gin." His voice failed him, and he knew he couldn't say anymore right then. Ginny reached out to him and placed a hand on his shoulder, clearly uncertain as to whether he'd want any contact. But he did. He was so cold, and so frightened, that he reacted without thinking, wrapping his arms around her desperately and pulling her close. Her body was warm, and that helped, especially when she twisted to the point where she was able to hug him in return. The feel of her hands running comfortingly through his hair and down his neck to rub his back was wonderfully soothing.

"They were laughing," he whispered into her red hair. The scent of vanilla and spice hit his nose and he sighed, clutching her even tighter. It must have hurt, but she didn't protest. "Voldemort took so much amusement out of it. He was enjoying himself. I could tell that every time he caused a little more pain, it was just that much more exciting. He's such a monster."

"I know," she murmured. She was actually sitting in his lap now, having been dragged there when he'd grabbed her, and her weight was solid, comforting, letting him know that the horrors of the vision were far behind him. "Don't worry, Harry. Someday soon we're going to find a way to bring him down for good."

"But what if we can't?" he asked, a hint of desperation evident in his voice. "What if I'm not strong enough? What if he does... that... to the whole world? To Hogwarts?" That familiar feeling of wanting to be sick began to creep back up on him.

"He won't," Ginny said firmly. Placing a hand on his cheek, she forced him to meet her eyes. Slowly, the fog cleared, until he was able to look back at her with clarity. "Harry, listen to me. You're not alone in this, do you understand me? We are all here to help you. I won't let you face him by yourself. I will be with you every step of the way."

Harry shivered again, though he was no longer actually as cold as he had been. Thoughts of the prophecy drifted over him like freezing mist. He'd done his best to avoid thinking about it, and he'd managed to push it to the back of his mind for the most part. There had never been a safe time during the summer to share it with Ron and Hermione, so he and Professor Dumbledore were the only ones that still knew. Ginny had no idea that she was wrong; he did have to face Voldemort alone, because he was the only who could. It was his destiny. He knew then that the time had come to share that terrible secret.

"Ginny... I have to tell you something."

Please review!

A/N: Well, I thought a lot about this chapter, let me tell you that first. I really did not know whether I should include a part with Remus and Sirius. So many people have complained about the slash in this story that I really hesitated. Finally, thought, I decided to put one in. I don't consider it to be slash at all (it could easily be taken as just two close friends in my opinion) but if it makes you truly uncomfortable, you can feel free to skip the first scene. I just don't want to hear any complaints about it. Everyone else, enjoy!

Long after Professor Dumbledore had left, Remus just sat there in his chair and stared at the man on the bed. Physically, Astrum didn't look even remotely familiar. He had very nice dark brown hair and sparkling brown eyes, and if he had just been a stranger on the street, he would have said that the man was fairly attractive. Not as handsome as Sirius Black, certainly, but cute enough to attract more than a few girls (or boys). He didn't understand why Dumbledore had called him all the way to Hogwarts just for the purpose of meeting this man. Although it was relatively easy to Floo, the short journey had exhausted him, and he'd been dragging with fatigue until Astrum reached out and put a hand on his arm.

The wolf had responded instantly. That prickly feeling just under his skin had actually lessened for the first time since Sirius's death. Even the pervasive exhaustion, the feeling that he just wanted to lay down and sleep forever, had been swept aside by a small but powerful jolt of energy. Remus narrowed his eyes slightly, wondering who the man was and why he'd been able to have that effect on him. No one should have been able to do that - except for Sirius, of course. Which meant there was one very obvious conclusion to be drawn. But that was impossible, and Remus didn't even want to let his mind go there. Because he'd already lost Sirius twice, and he knew that losing the man for a third time would break him completely. There would be no coming back or hanging on. So he stood up... or tried to.

"Let go of me," he ordered when the man's hand tightened on his arm. The words came out much shakier than he would have liked, and he frowned slightly, frustrated, as the wolf fought him as well, demanding that he sit back down.

"I can't," said Astrum sadly, a look of regret flashing into his eyes. "You're dying, Remus. Oh Merlin - I should have seen this coming, but I didn't. I'm so sorry. I should have come to you months ago, no

matter what the cost was. It never even occurred to me since I wasn't really..." He trailed off and shook his head, seemingly unable to finish speaking. Instead, he sat up and reached for a wand that was sitting on the nightstand. Remus watched him pick it up, feeling like he was a distant observer as the man pointed the wand at himself and uttered a long string of unfamiliar Latin words. Light fizzled over his skin, causing Remus to squint. His jaw dropped when the light finally died away and Sirius Black looked up at him with a sad smile.

"Sirius?" he whispered, truly stunned. His legs gave out from underneath me and he fell back onto the chair, staring at his oldest friend and mate in awe-struck silence. "But... what... how... you can't be. This can't be happening." He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head frantically. "Oh my god, this is it. I've finally lost it."

"It is happening. Remus, look at me," Sirius commanded.

Slowly, Remus did. He drank in the sight of his friend, his mate, taking in the healthy tanned skin and the long black hair tied neatly into a loose ponytail at the nape of Sirius's neck. The taller man looked healthier than he had since his escape from Azkaban. His body had filled out a little more after several months' worth of good food and proper rest, and the deep lines in his face had smoothed out considerably, those his silvery blue eyes still held a look of someone that had been both haunted and hunted. A hesitant smile quirked his lips, and he reached out gently to cup Remus's cheek. The wolf howled in triumph at the reaffirming touch of its mate. Remus froze in the action of pulling back.

"It's really me," Sirius repeated. "I can prove it to you. We met in first year on the train, but you didn't become friends with James and me until you hexed Dorothy Dumspin and we got blamed for it. I fucked everything up in sixth year when I sent Snape after you." He cast around. "My... My animagus form is a grim. I can transform if you want. Just - I'm so sorry, Moony. I wanted to tell you, but Dumbledore made me promise that I wouldn't. He had me swear a wizard's oath that I would never do or say anything that would allow people to know that Chance Astrum is really Sirius Black."

"How..." Remus said through numb lips, feeling faint. "I don't..."

"The portkey," said Sirius, still wearing that sad, wistful smile.

Remus jerked backwards like he'd been slapped. Amber eyes widened as the full implications of those two words settled into his mind. After Arthur Weasley's attack the year before, Albus Dumbledore had issued every member of the Order of the Phoenix a special portkey. It could be activated by either the wearer or the person who had created it - i.e., Dumbledore. The portkey had been designed to take the wearer to a safe, undisclosed location where they could stay until someone, likely Dumbledore or another trusted member of the Order, could come help them. However, the portkey was also special in that there was no physical sign to indicate that it was being used, nor was there residual magic left over. Very powerful, very rare, and it had never once occurred to him that Sirius might have used it to escape his fate.

"But... you fell..." he said dumbly. "I saw you."

"I started to," Sirius agreed, grabbing his hand again. "At the very last second, I managed to spit out the word to activate the portkey. It took me to this house on the other side of the world. The veil, or maybe the spell Bellatrix hit me with, or both, left me feeling sick, dazed, and disoriented. I was half dead by the time Dumbledore came along and found me. While I was still out of it, he had me swear an Oath to make sure that I wouldn't let anyone know that I was alive as long as he kept acting in Harry's best interests." He studied Remus's expression and shook his head. "Here, Moony, look."

He set his wand down and closed his eyes. In the time it took to blink, a large, familiar dog with shaggy black fur had replaced Sirius Black. With a joyful yelp, the pup bounded forward and licked Remus's face from chin to forehead before backing off with what could only be described as a smug smile. Seconds later, he was back to Sirius Black. Remus stared for a few moments, mind processing the information at an extremely slow pace, before he realized that it was true. Sirius was alive.

"You've been alive all this time..." Remus whispered. It was kind of like there had been a curtain around his thoughts all that time, and now suddenly, he could see and think clearly. Rage swept through him, pushing aside the shocked numbness. "That bastard!"

"Moony, stop!" When he would have jumped up and stormed out, Sirius stopped him. "That won't do you any good. Dumbledore only accept you into the Oath because you were dying, but I know he's going to come back to make you swear an Oath before he'll let you go." He clenched his free hand into a fist. "I'll loose my magic if I tell anyone."

"I won't do it," he said instantly. "He can't make me."

Sirius glanced up and regarded him with longing. "If you don't, then he'll Oblivate you," he said quietly. "The wolf won't forget that I'm alive, but you will. You'll suffer even more horribly than before because you won't understand what the wolf wants, and it will think you're actively denying yourself. Is that what you really want?"

"No, what I really want is for none of this to have ever happened!" Unable to sit any longer, he jumped to his feet and strode across the Hospital Wing to the door. Without even bothering to reach for his wand, he drew his fist back and punched the door hard. It barely made a dent, and his fingers began to ache almost immediately, but he didn't care about the pain.

"Remus!" Suddenly, Sirius was there, wrapping his arms around him from the back. Remus struggled against him for a moment, seething with the desire to find Dumbledore and make him pay. "Remus, please. Don't do this. You don't understand how strong Dumbledore is. He could destroy you. I don't want you to die. I need you. Please."

The obvious misery in his mate's voice was what got through to him. Remus stopped and took a deep breath, his whole body shuddering, before he twisted to face Sirius. There were actual tears in Sirius's eyes, which shocked him. He could count on one hand the amount of times in his life that he'd seen Sirius cry. For the first time, it really hit him that he and the wolf weren't the only ones that had suffered. Silently, he reached out, bringing his arms up around Sirius's waist and clinging to him almost desperately. This time, there was no keeping the tears of his own back as Sirius embraced him in return. How many times he had dreamt about this happening? And now that it was, he could hardly believe it.

"You're really here, aren't you?" he mumbled, shivering slightly.

"I'm really here," Sirius promised, rocking him gently back and forth. "I'm really here, Moony, and I swear to you that this time, I'm not going anywhere."

NIR

Long after Harry stopped speaking, Ginny sat on his lap and stared off into space at nothing in particular. The words of the prophecy rang through her mind, reverberating around her head until she thought she'd scream. Harry was tense beneath her, though he no longer appeared to be on the verge of tears. His hands were now clutching onto her hips so tightly that it had actually started to hurt, but she didn't really mind. Her hand was still absently rubbing his back in a motion meant to be soothing, but she'd lost all of her focus when it came to making him feel better. Nothing could be done about something like this.

Ginny didn't know a lot about prophecies, but she did know that a lot of witches and wizards held them in high esteem. Dumbledore had obviously believed in this one, and so had Voldemort, to the point where the two of them had been willing to fight over it while placing poor Harry in the middle. She could feel herself beginning to get angry, and it was an actual struggle to keep herself from climbing off of Harry's lap and going to find Albus Dumbledore so that she could shake him and demand to know what he'd been thinking. How could he have kept something like that from Harry for so long? And how dare he tell the boy on the night that Sirius had died? What kind of cruelty was that?

"Gin? You okay?" Harry asked, sounding a bit uncertain.

"What?" She turned and looked at him in surprise, then blinked and nodded. "Oh, yes, I'm fine," she said. It took a concentrated effort to keep the venom from surfacing in her voice. "I was just wondering why Dumbledore never bothered to tell you about the prophecy before. Surely it would have been better for you to have known why Voldemort kept coming after you."

"He wanted to give me a normal childhood," he answered bitterly. "That's what he said... when I asked him once."

The rage built until she was grinding her teeth and her fingers actually spasmed in the desire to reach for her wand. Dumbledore

was a powerful wizard who was held in esteem by many, but sometimes she couldn't even begin to fathom what went through the man's mind. "A normal childhood?" she repeated, the words a complete mockery in light of what Harry had lived through growing up. "After you grew up with the Dursleys?"

His lips twitched with the parody of a smile. "Somehow I don't think he ever quite grasped the concept that the Dursleys were a less than loving family. He seemed to think that putting me with them was still the best decision."

She switched to chewing her lip, the pain helping to keep the lid on her fury, as she searched Harry's jade green eyes, wondering what he was thinking. Speaking of Dumbledore no longer appeared to make him angry, but wearier. It didn't help that he was clearly exhausted from a poor night's sleep. With effort, she forced herself to let go of the anger for the time being and instead began running her fingers through Harry's curly black hair. His eyes closed and he gave a soft sigh as his head tilted unconsciously into the touch, like a kitten seeking more contact. Ginny smiled to herself, realizing that he looked a bit like a little boy.

"You're not alone, Harry," she said softly into his ear. "As long as I'm here... I promise that you'll never be alone. Don't forget about me and Hermione. We're both standing behind you."

"Don't want you to get hurt," he mumbled into her shoulder, sounding exhausted. "Voldemort... he's been hunting me because he believes that I'm the one who can bring him down. That's the whole point of that bloody prophecy. Anyone who associates me is putting themselves into the line of danger, especially you and Hermione. I want you two to be safe. Dunno what I'd do if something happened to either of you..." He trailed off as a blush lit Ginny's cheeks. She drew back hesitantly, wondering if she really heard that tone of caring in his voice, or if she had just imagined it.

"I can't promise you that we won't get hurt," she replied at last. "But I can promise that I'll do my best to keep safe, and to do the same for Hermione. As long as you promise that you won't try to drive us away. You can't keep us out of this war, Harry. This is our home, too, and it's our right to fight for it, regardless of whether you are Voldemort's specific target. This prophecy... It might mean that the

end of it will be up to you, but I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure that I'm with you every step of the way."

Harry's grip on her tightened even further, if that was possible, and he sighed in agreement before relaxing his arms ever so slightly. She could feel him beginning to drift back into a hazy sleep, no doubt brought on by exhaustion. The way the two of them were positioned meant that it was nearly impossible for her to climb out of his lap without waking him up; he had his arms wound around her waist, and she was sitting with her back to the arm of the couch, her side against his chest, and her legs drawn up underneath the warmth of Harry's robe. Not that she really minded cuddling on the couch with him, particularly after seeing the state he'd been in when he'd called her on the mirror. Merlin but he'd nearly given her a heart attack! The last time Harry had looked so upset had been the night that Sirius died, and she'd been petrified someone else had died.

"You idiot. What am I going to do with you?" she murmured, her voice filled with affection. Gently, she brushed a strand of hair away from his scar and tenderly kissed the inflamed mark, just lightly brushing her lips across the heated skin. Dumbledore and Voldemort were both such bastards, she thought, pulling back a bit. How could they put so much onto the shoulders of one sixteen-year-old boy? It hardly seemed fair that Harry had to walk around with the fate of the world on his shoulders.

But no, he wouldn't be alone, not if she had anything to say about it. Just saying the prophecy out loud to someone else appeared to have taken a huge weight off of Harry's shoulders. Ginny sighed and laid her head on his shoulder, watching his chest rise and fall. In some ways, Hermione was really very right about Harry's hero complex: he seemed to not only have the desire to save everyone, but felt the need to take everything on himself even though it wasn't necessary. Hopefully, it would be a habit that she'd be able to break him of. There was no need for Harry to carry so much stress around. It would kill him long before Voldemort got the chance to.

At some point, she was vaguely aware of drifting off into a light doze. Harry made a surprisingly warm and comfortable pillow, and she was tired from everything that had been going on. She was never very sure of how long they slept, but eventually, she became aware of soft whispers and stifled giggles. Prying open eyes that burned, she realized that Hermione was sitting beside them on the couch,

very pointedly not looking in their direction as she scribbled on a piece of ivory parchment. There were also other students in the Tower who were doing a much worse job of pretending not to watch. Many were outright staring. Ginny blinked heavily and flushed when it occurred to her how the two of them must have looked.

"Harry, wake up," she hissed into his ear, rubbing her eyes. Harry stirred slowly, coming back to the world with a faintly puzzled look. He looked up at Ginny and gave her a slow, private smile that made her heart skip a beat.

"I guess we fell asleep, huh?" he asked sleepily.

"Yeah, we did," Ginny said, wishing that the sweet, innocent look could remain in his eyes. It killed her to watch Harry come back to himself. He visibly shut down as he caught on to the fact that they had a whole host of observers. His hands quickly withdrew from around her waist, allowing her to prop herself up on the arm of the couch instead of leaning against him. She sighed, missing his warmth, and tried to smile. "Did you... sleep better? No..."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Not this time around."

Hermione's head rose, and she glanced at the two of them for the first time. "Did you have a vision last night?" she asked quickly, sounding more alert than she had in weeks.

"I think so. It was a bit too gruesome to just be a regular nightmare," he muttered, conscious of the fact that several Gryffindors were straining to hear their every word. A well-aimed glare scattered the majority of them, but being that they were a group known for being brave, a few stuck around just for the hell of some extra gossip. He dropped his voice. "It was Voldemort. He was destroying a muggle village."

"Did you tell Dumbledore?" A cross look shot across her face when Harry shook his head. "Oh, Harry. I know you're having problems with him right now, but that's no excuse to avoid telling him something like this. All those people..."

Harry stared at her, looking insulted. "Do you think I just let them die? Merlin, Hermione. There no point in telling Dumbledore because they were all dead by the time I woke up. Voldemort made

sure of that." He stood up so quickly that he nearly flipped Ginny over the side of the couch. She caught herself just in time. "I'm going to go get ready for class."

"Shit. I guess I buggered that up," Hermione mumbled as their friend stormed away.

Ginny shot the girl a surprised look, unable to remember the last time she'd heard Hermione swear. "I'm afraid to say that you did," she said wryly, watching Harry's retreating form. Running a hand through her messy and tangled hair, she sighed and stretched. It felt like it was way too early to get up, and she really wished that all of the Gryffindors would have pissed off for another couple of hours. Sleeping in Harry's arms always left her feeling safe and content, and those weren't emotions that she had the chance to experience all that often.

Hermione sighed as well. "I guess I'll go try to smooth it over. I didn't mean it like it sounded." Grimacing, she rubbed her nose, leaving behind a smear of ink. "I just meant... I know that Harry's been having so much trouble with Dumbledore lately, and you know how he can be about his visions..."

"I know. I think Harry's just a bit tired. That vision really rattled him," she confessed, sliding down into the spot of warmth that Harry had left behind. He hadn't actually told her much about the vision, but what she'd heard had been enough to know that it must have been terrifying. "I'm fairly certain that by the time Voldemort let him go, it was too late."

"God." Hermione looked sick. "I'm going to go make sure he's okay."

She swept her roll of parchment into her bag and stood up, swinging it over her shoulder before she headed up the stairs to the boy's dormitories. Ginny watched her go with a raised eyebrow, realizing that Hermione must have been truly worried to have not considered that she might run into Ron up there. Gradually, she became conscious of the weight of several stares on her back, and glanced around in time to see most of the students in the room looking away. Rolling her eyes, she got off of the couch and walked back up to her own room. Her roommates were all gone, and apparently a house elf had already been through, because the mess her bed had been in earlier that morning had been neatened.

It only took her a couple of minutes to get dressed in a skirt and a top before she slipped her robes on. A quick run through her hair with a brush and she was ready; she was too worried about Harry to put much effort into her appearance for a regular school day. That reminded her, however, of just what would be happening that night: Harry's date with Susan. Slowly, she placed the brush back on her nightstand and sat down hard on the bed. Somehow the date had completely sipped her mind, but now there was no way to avoid thinking about it.

"I don't want to think about it," she muttered out loud, scrubbing her face with the palms of her hands. She was tired and hungry and had a bad headache from lack of sleep, and the last thing she wanted to think about was Harry possibly finding a girlfriend. Why couldn't she be happy with the friendship that she had with him? Why did she have to want something more?

"Ginny?" Hermione pushed her head into the room. "Are you - what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she answered, standing up and forcing a bright tone. "How's Harry?"

"He's alright. We're going down to breakfast," Hermione replied, frowning slightly. Her eyes studied Ginny closely, but she made no more comment, for which Ginny was grateful as she followed the older girl out of the bedroom. Harry was waiting for them downstairs in the Common Room, and the three of them left together. Once or twice, she glanced at Harry out of the corner of her eye, wishing that she could determine whether or not he'd been thinking about Susan. But Harry's face was pretty much blank, with no clues.

Professor McGonagall stopped them at the entrance to the Great Hall. "Mr Potter, I'd like it if you could go visit Professor Dumbledore," she said briskly. "There was a small... incident... last night, and he wants to know if you know anything about it. He's going to be waiting for you in the Hospital Wing so that Madame Pomfrey can check your scar." She glanced at Harry's forehead, where the red, inflamed scar tissue was standing out starkly against the paleness of his skin.

"I'll come with you," Ginny said, instantly forgoing the thought of breakfast, even though her stomach was growling. She inwardly cursed herself for not having taught Harry a little more about mental shielding before they met with Dumbledore. His mind would be open to the man. That would have to be rectified and soon.

"That's not necessary, Miss Ginevra," Professor McGonagall replied. "You and Miss Granger – "

"I want her to come." Harry looked up at the professor and frowned. "I won't go unless Ginny comes with me."

For a brief moment, Professor McGonagall and Hermione both looked astonished. "Mr Potter, you are hardly in a position to be making such demands," she said slowly, glancing back and forth between Harry and Ginny. "But I suppose as long as Miss Ginevra is willing to make up the class time that she might miss, it would be alright if she goes with you just this once."

"Thanks. Come on, Ginny." Squaring his shoulders, he turned away from the doors and started walking towards the Hospital Wing. Ginny ran after him and fell in beside him a couple of steps later. She waited until they'd turned a corner before she cast a subtle glance in his direction. He was staring at the ground, looking tired. It was clear that the last thing he wanted to do was talk to anyone, especially Professor Dumbledore, about the vision that he'd had. Her heart squeezed painfully, and before she'd registered the movement, her hand had reached out and slipped into his. Harry started at the touch and turned to her with a surprised look.

"Don't worry, Harry. Remember what I told you this morning," she said softly. "I'm here with you. It will be okay."

Anxiety and worry melted away into an affectionate look, and Harry tightened his grip, not letting her drop her hand. "Thanks, Gin," he said quietly, not seeming to mind that they were walking through the castle holding hands.

"Anytime," she replied breathlessly as they reached the Hospital Wing. The first thing they saw when they walked into the room was Professor Dumbledore standing beside Remus Lupin and Chance Astrum. Dumbledore was holding his wand out, and Ginny had just enough time to see a glowing ball of bluish-colored magic twine

around his hand and Remus's before it vanished. At nearly the same moment, Madame Pomfrey bustled out of her office and went straight over to Astrum with a foreboding look.

"You will drink this, and I'll hear no more of your protests," she said threateningly.

Astrum scowled in reply but obediently took the vial that she was holding out. He downed the glowing green liquid without a word, but made a disgusted face as he handed it back. "There, it's gone. Happy?"

Madame Pomfrey arched an eyebrow. "I will be happy when I see the back of you exiting my Wing," she replied. "Now, hold still." Her eyes narrowed in focus as she performed a couple of spells over his body. Ginny recognized the one that glowed a soft blue when it settled over the man's skin, like dust. Astrum grinned smugly when he saw the blue color.

"See? All healed. Now can I go?" he demanded.

"Honestly, you're worse than a child!" Pomfrey muttered, though there was a touch of fondness in her eyes. "I'll have one more potion for you to take, and then yes, you may go." It was hard to tell who sounded happier about that fact. She turned to Remus. "And you, Mr Lupin. What's this I hear about you not eating and sleeping properly?"

Remus winced, looking fairly sheepish. "I'm sorry, Poppy," he said, somehow managing to sound a bit like a boy who was being chastened by his mother. "I've been having a rough go of it for the past few weeks. But I'm feeling much better now." His arm moved unconsciously, and Ginny noticed for the first time that he was clinging to Professor Astrum. She frowned, curious, wondering why Remus had never mentioned Astrum before if they were such good friends. But then again, surely the man had had friends outside of the Marauders?

"I'm going to give you some potions as well," she said in a tone of voice that dared him to argue. "And you. Mr Potter!"

Harry jumped and his hand tightened even more around Ginny's. It was obvious that he hadn't realized that Pomfrey had noticed them. "Err... yes?" he asked weakly.

"Come here and sit down on the bed. I've purchased a salve for your scar that will help with the pain and swelling," she said, bustling over to one of the cupboards at the other end of the room. Harry and Ginny looked at each other, and then Harry walked over to the bed the furthest away from Remus, Astrum, and Dumbledore, dragging Ginny along behind him. He perched on the very end, looking uncomfortable and like he'd love nothing more than to run away. Ginny leaned against the bed and his shoulder, trying not to look at the three men in the room. It was easier said than done. She felt awkward ignoring their presence, but soon it didn't matter, because Dumbledore grew tired of the game.

"Harry," he said, walking over to the two of them. Harry tensed slightly but lifted his head, though he didn't meet Dumbledore's eyes. He stared at a point somewhere over the man's right shoulder. "I'm told that you had a vision last night. Is that true?"

"Yes, though I have to wonder how you found out," the boy said flatly.

"That is neither here nor there," the headmaster replied easily. "What's important is that you tell me exactly what happened."

"You want to know?" Harry asked, a note of cold bitterness ringing strong through his voice. "Voldemort and his precious Death Eaters slowly and surely killed every last one of those people. They laughed when the children cried and thoroughly enjoyed it when the parents couldn't deal with the deaths of their babies." He was actually shaking, and his grip had grown so tight on Ginny's hand that it had become painful. "Not a fucking one of them stopped or even had the human decency to care. Only when they were absolutely certain that they'd squeezed every last drop of blood out of the town did they set everything on fire, like it didn't even matter. And through it all, that fucking murderous bastard just stood there and laughed, and he held me there so I had to watch." Finally, he met Dumbledore's eyes. The usually warm emerald orbs were like cold stone. "That's what happened, Dumbledore. Forgive me for not

running to your door so that you could drop a bunch of fucking useless platitudes on my head."

Dumbledore's jaw firmed. "I understand you're upset by what you saw, Harry, but I must ask that you do not blame me. Voldemort's actions are nearly impossible to predict, even with the aid that's open to us." He gave the boy a significant look. "We're doing the best that we can."

Rage flashed in Harry's eyes, and seconds before he would have really let go, Professor McGonagall appeared at the door of the Hospital Wing like an unknowing angel of mercy. "Headmaster, the Minister of Magic has arrived. He wants to speak to you," she said, sounding rather strained.

"Of course, Minerva. Harry, I do hope that if you have any other visions you'll come speak to me," he added, blue eyes stern. Ginny dropped her free hand onto Harry's shoulder and squeezed warningly. Harry remained silent as Dumbledore turned away and strode towards the door of the Wing. The second that he was out of sight, Harry twisted and brought his arm up around Ginny's waist, pulling her body towards the front of the bed, so that his head was pressed into her waist, like the world was too hard to face anymore.

Ginny looked down at the top of his head and felt a wave of unbearable sadness mingled with anger. She moved her free hand from his shoulder to his neck, wishing that there was something she could do or say to make him feel better. But she was highly conscious of the presence of both Astrum and Remus, and she didn't dare say anything with the two of them around. Remus had always been an avid supporter of Dumbledore, and Astrum was a wild card; no one really knew who he would follow, but it was safe to say that it was not a student that he barely knew. No, in this they were alone.

Please review!

A/N: Thanks for the reviews! It was brought to my attention that Susan is a redhead, not a blonde. Oops, my mistake. Since she won't be in the story for much longer, I'm not going to bother correcting it, but chalk that one up to a research issue (because I actually did go look, and I could have sworn she was blonde... this is why I got out of school). Other than that, I hope everyone enjoys this chapter, because there are a couple of different advancements... I can hear everyone going "FINALLY" already.

"How have you been, Harry?"

Surprisingly, it was Remus who broke the silence. Ginny had been doing her best to not even look at the two men who were both openly staring at them, but that was easier said than done. Astrum was making no effort to hide his curiosity, and Remus had a kicked puppy look on his face. Harry stiffened as soon as the werewolf spoke, and for just a moment, he pressed his face harder into Ginny's midsection, like there was a chance that the world would just disappear if he held onto her for long enough. She kept her arm around his shoulders as he finally pulled his face away and looked over one shoulder with a distrustful look. His grip prevented her from moving away, like she was a teddy bear and he was a child determined to keep her close for safety.

"How have I been?" he repeated incredulously. "I sincerely hope that's a joke, Professor Lupin." Even though he spoke the name with a modicum of respect, it was still spat out like a slur. Remus flinched, and Astrum's hand tightened on his arm.

"I'm afraid not," Remus replied eventually. There was a weariness in his amber eyes that made Ginny wince. No matter how angry or hurt Harry was with the man's actions, it was impossible to avoid noticing that he looked like he'd been through hell and back again. "I... I'd heard that you were coping admirably with what's been going on this year."

"You'd know for certain if you'd bothered to write me," Harry said, his words clipped with ice. "Come on, Ginny." He made as if he were going to rise to leave, but Madame Pomfrey chose that moment to re-enter the room. Her eyes landed on Harry and her nostrils flared.

"Sit. Down. Potter," she grated out.

Startled by the poorly repressed annoyance in her voice, Harry sat. His tight hold yanked Ginny down with him, so that she landed half in his lap. Madame Pomfrey stalked over to them before Ginny had the chance to move, bringing with her a small jar. She hovered over Harry and unscrewed the top, then deftly pushed his fringe off of his forehead so that she could examine his scar. Her tongue clucked with disapproval as she scooped a generous amount of pale green balm up with her fingers and gently began smearing it over the inflamed skin. Only once a large portion of his forehead was covered did she stop, fetch her wand, and murmur a spell under her breath. The balm turned to a creamy color and Harry sighed, relaxing so quickly that Ginny was nearly pushed over, catching them just in time as he sagged against her in relief.

"Really, you should be coming to me the instant that you're feeling pain," said Pomfrey, softening ever so slightly in the face of his clear gratitude. "There's no need for that. I know that I didn't have this balm before, but I could have done something. And now that I have got it, you should know that it's not good for your skin when I have to put so much on. Coming to me sooner would eliminate that problem."

"Right away next time," Harry mumbled in agreement. His fingers fluttered uselessly in the air for a moment, as though he wanted to feel his forehead, before his hand dropped back down to his side.

Madame Pomfrey screwed the top back on, tucked the jar into a pocket of her robe, and turned towards Remus and Astrum. She levitated a couple of vials from the cabinet on the far side of the room and ordered the men to drink them. Ginny glanced down at Harry, wondering if the boy would want to make his escape while they were distracted, but he didn't seem inclined to move anytime soon. His eyes were closed and he was resting his head against her shoulder, looking like he was halfway to falling asleep. Not that she really minded his presence, even if she was being used as a pillow, but she didn't think Remus was going to let this go anytime soon.

"Will you be staying at the castle long, Remus?" she asked, never moving her gaze away from Harry.

Remus glanced at her, surprised by the fact that there was no ire present in her voice. "Yes, I will," he said after a moment's thoughtful

pause, glancing at Astrum. "Or at least... I think I will. At the very least, I'll be around a lot more often."

Ginny nodded without saying anything in response and sighed, rubbing her forehead. If all of the tension floating around was starting to get to her, she could only imagine how Harry was feeling. "Harry, come on," she said, purposely tilting her head so that her hair swept across his face. He scowled as the strands tickled his skin, and she smirked. "I don't know about you, but I can't really afford to miss Potions. Snape hates me enough as it is."

"Snape hates everyone," Harry muttered, reluctantly opening his eyes. He stood up, pointedly not looking in the direction of Remus or Astrum, and pulled Ginny up with him.

"Harry!" Remus called out, rising. "Wait. Can't we... I'd like to... talk."

"Save it." Harry didn't even glance back as he walked out of the Hospital Wing, leaving Ginny to hurry after him. Her last glimpse of Remus was of the man slumping back into his chair with his hands over his face, and Astrum leaning forward in an attempt to comfort him. She frowned slightly as she caught up with Harry, her mind working furiously. Something about the two men seemed... off. But she couldn't put her finger on what it was, and anyway, she had more important things to think about.

"You didn't have to be so rude to him," she huffed out.

"Rude? You think I was rude?" His derisive laughter was short and mocking. "Gin, I wrote Remus tons of letters over the summer, and he didn't respond to 90% of them. The ones that he did answer to had some generic answer that anyone could have written. And don't give me that bull about the owls being monitored. One actual letter would've - " He stopped abruptly and looked at her, revealing old pain. "Why should he only get to be there when it's convenient for him? He wasn't the only one who lost someone. I lost Sirius, too..."

"Oh, Harry." Softening, Ginny reached out impulsively and threw her arms around his neck. Harry hesitated a moment before his arms came up to wrap around her tightly. "I'm so sorry. I know that Remus wasn't the only one who lost someone, but... It was very hard on him, losing Sirius. Werewolves mate for life, you know."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

It took a moment for his words to catch up to her. Then she pulled back far enough to look at him with a raised eyebrow. "Harry, you do know that Sirius and Remus were... together, right?"

"Together...?" he echoed blankly.

"Oh my god, you didn't know," she muttered, wondering how she'd missed that. She'd found out during one of her midnight talks with Sirius. The man wasn't exactly the sort to watch what he said when he really got going, particularly when alcohol was involved, and a lot of his stories seemed to end in him and Remus sneaking off. It had been so endearing to watch the two of them interact that it had never occurred to her that Harry might not have known. Hermione had worked it out within a week of staying at Grimmauld Place, and she'd assumed that the older girl had passed the revelation along to her two friends. Apparently not.

"Didn't know what?" Harry looked frustrated now.

"Sirius and Remus were dating," she said bluntly.

Harry froze. It was interesting to watch his expression change as he processed that bit of information. First he looked shocked, then he frowned, and then he scowled. For a moment, she thought that he was going to deny what she'd said, and she readied herself for a confrontation. But then – slowly – his expression progressed to understanding and awareness, and she knew that the proverbial light had dawned. No doubt he was doing exactly what she had done when she first found out, which was to mentally reassess every time she'd seen them together. It had resulted in having a bunch of little puzzle pieces that had never quite made sense before suddenly snap into place.

"They're together," he said finally, and shook his head. "I feel so stupid. I can't believe I didn't see that before."

"They were very good at hiding it," Ginny replied honestly, remembering how long it had taken Remus to feel comfortable in showing any kind of affection towards Sirius in her presence. "My point is, werewolves mate for life. Sirius was everything to him. It was bad enough when Remus thought that Sirius had betrayed him,

but at least Sirius was still alive. This time around... Remus is dying, Harry. He can't survive without..." She trailed off before her voice became too quivery to continue, as it often did when she thought about Remus and Sirius. The two of them had been doomed from the start, and that was so unfair that it physically hurt.

"Oh." Harry didn't say anything for a moment. He was frowning thoughtfully. "I have to... to think."

Ginny just nodded and pulled back. "Take your time," she advised quietly, slipping her fingers around his elbow. Harry kept moving and she was content to walk down the hall beside him in silence, knowing that he would need time to fully process the information and to weigh the revelation against the fact that Remus had virtually ignored him for the whole summer. She didn't know for certain what he would decide, but she had the feeling that Harry and Remus would come through it alright.

NIR

In the privacy of her small apartment, Auror Nymphadora Tonks bent over the list that she had 'borrowed' from the Unspeakables with narrowed eyes. Most of the names on the list meant little to her. Most of the brains had belonged to wizards and witches who were just perpetually afraid of death. They had been so desperate to continue living that they had been willing to donate their brains for study. According to the rumours she'd heard about the Room of Thought, the result was that they lived half-lives, never truly aware of their fate. She tried to imagine a life spent in a little glass tank and shuddered.

"People are bloody mad," she muttered, not the first time she'd come to that sort of conclusion. About half a dozen names had been circled on her list. They were all either high-profile Death Eaters from Voldemort's reign of terror, or purebloods from families with strong ties to the Dark. There didn't appear to be a record of just whose brain had struck Ron Weasley - either the Unspeakables weren't entirely certain or that information had been classified in a place she didn't dare risk going into - and that meant she had gone as far as she could on her own. It was time to take things to the one who started it all.

Rising to her feet, she threw her arms over her head in a stretch, then grabbed the list and left her room. Admittedly, she was deeply curious about the whole situation, and she intended to see it through. Her Auror work had been less than fascinating lately, as the majority of the more interesting tasks tended to go the Aurors with more experience (or money, as was the case with the often corrupted Ministry). As soon as she was outside of the wards, she gave a quick turn of her heel and disappeared with a faint pop -

- only to reappear at the gates of Hogwarts. Tonks pushed the gate open and lazily strolled up to the castle. Several students looked at her curiously, but she paid them no mind as she entered the school. Coming back to Hogwarts always felt a bit like coming home, and she felt the weight drop from her shoulders as she turned in the direction of Gryffindor Tower. Even after a few years, nothing about the castle had changed, including the Fat Lady's refusal to allow even an Auror into the Tower without the correct password. She could have used her abilities to get inside with no problem, but instead, she opted for grabbing a little first year and asking him to fetch Hermione Granger. Tonks didn't have to wait long. Hermione scrambled out through the portal moments later.

"Do you have it?" she asked breathlessly, her cheeks flushed from her mad dash down the stairs.

"I do," Tonks said with a nod, discreetly patting one of her pockets. The hallway was not the place to talk about it, though, and she glanced around, keenly aware of the many paintings that were observing her with less than subtle fascination. No doubt the Headmaster would be aware of her presence within the next five minutes, and he'd want to know what she was doing in the castle. She'd have to work fast. "Come on, Hermione, let's go somewhere that we can talk in private."

Hermione nodded and, without saying a word, led Tonks up to the Room of Requirement. Up until that point, it had been largely the secret of the Hogwarts students and professors, but she and Tonks were in need of a place where Dumbledore had no spies, and she couldn't think of anywhere else that wasn't outside where they would run the risk of being overheard or seen. She paced the required three times and watched Tonks's eyes widen as the door appeared. With a small smile, Hermione pulled the door open to reveal the, by now, familiar study with the bed tucked away in the corner. Tonks

glanced at it as they walked in, but she had the decency not to ask. Instead, she got right down to business.

"As I said, I got the list," she stated briskly. "I've circled a few names that were Death Eaters or families with known ties to the Dark Lord. What exactly is it that you're looking for?"

There was a moment's pause in which Hermione just looked at her for a long moment as she tried to decide whether or not it would be alright to bring Tonks into their confidence. She hadn't exactly discussed the matter with Harry or Ginny, but then again, the two of them had been pretty much leaving all of the decisions surrounding Ron up to her. It would be nice to have someone else to lean on, especially if that someone could look at things in an un-biased manner, the way that neither Harry nor Ginny could. And from what she knew of Tonks, the girl might have been a bit of a klutz, but she was a good fighter with a serious streak of stubborn... and she was Sirius's niece, and he'd trusted her.

"How loyal are you to Dumbledore?" she asked after a long silence.

Now it was Tonks's turn to be quiet as she sat down on one of the chairs and looked thoughtfully at Hermione, wondering what had prompted that question. "I trust him to take care of Voldemort," she said carefully, realizing that she was walking a very thin line. One wrong word and Hermione would clamp up tighter than some of the suspects she'd had to interrogate - and somehow, she suspected that it would be much more difficult to make Hermione talk. "I think that he's tried to do the best he can in the position that he's in."

It was a good answer for a cryptic question, Hermione realized, brushing a strand of bushy hair behind her ear. She hadn't meant to make it sound like she wasn't loyal to Dumbledore, though really, with every day that went by... "I meant, if I tell you some things, I have to trust that you're not going to repeat them. What I tell you is only known by three people. Me, Harry, and Ginny. That's as far as it can go."

"I'll keep it to myself," Tonks promised without skipping a beat. She was so damn sick of being given the little, unimportant jobs in the Order. The only time she felt like her presence was valued was when there was an attack and they needed manpower, or when Harry needed to be guarded. There were things that she could offer

the war, and if Dumbledore wasn't going to recognize that, then she would go to the next best thing. "As long as no one ends up hurt or killed because of what you're telling me."

Finally, Hermione's lips pressed into a thin smirk. "Then I really don't think I should tell you. Harry has a bad habit of getting himself into some kind of scrape every single year. Madame Pomfrey practically has a hospital bed dedicated to him."

The Auror laughed. "Come on, Hermione, tell me what's going on," she urged. "Maybe I can help you out a little more. Like I said, I've already picked out a few names for you to examine, and I know this has to do with Ron. You said that he was attacked by one of the brains from the Room of Thought down in the Department of Mysteries, right?" She leaned back, purposely hoping to incite Hermione into talking by leading her in. "I don't understand how that could be. I mean... they're just brains. Sure, some of them have been experimented on, but they're not supposed to be dangerous."

"Key words would be "supposed to be"," said Hermione wryly. For better or worse, she'd made up her mind to trust Tonks. "During the battle, Ron was struck with a spell," she began. Quickly, she told Tonks everything that she had figured out about the spell so far, including how it had lowered Ron's natural and magical defences to the point where the brain could infect his mind. Tonks looked fairly sick at that announcement.

"Gross," she muttered, unknowingly echoing Ginny. "Remind me to never to go down there again."

"Tell me about it. Anyway, I think that brain actually possessed Ron, sort of. It changed his thought processes, making him want things he didn't want before. He started hating Harry. Then someone... I don't know who... was able to use the Imperious Curse to make him break the bonds between the Weasleys and Potters. And later, a boy by the name of Alexander Worrac used the Imperious Curse to make Ron attack Harry." Hermione sighed and rubbed her aching head. "I don't know if Worrac was the one who originally cursed Ron or not."

"He could have been," Tonks said after thinking for a moment. "It doesn't take a lot of strength or skill to use the Imperious Curse. If

you want it badly enough, even a sixth or seventh year could probably do it with no problem."

"I know." She looked disturbed by that prospect. "But I've been looking into it, and I think it would've taken an enormous amount of power to Imperio Ron that first time. Even if the brain had infected him to make it possible, the power it would have taken to make it happen is way beyond the strength of the average student at Hogwarts. I mean, Harry could do it, but he's a lot more powerful than most of us."

Tonks nodded absently, thinking hard. Worrac. There was something about that name that was ringing faintly to her, but what? She dug the list of names out of her pocket and looked at it, aware that Hermione had gone silent and was staring at the sheet with an eager, almost desperate light in her eyes. For the time being, Tonks ignored her as she perused the circled names, looking for the link, knowing that she was missing something... and then she saw it. A gasp slipped out before she could smother it, nearly sending Hermione climbing over the coffee table.

"What? What is it?" the girl cried.

"I thought something about the name seemed off, but it didn't hit me until now," Tonks said hoarsely, a dread of fear sinking into her stomach. Tossing the list down, she pointed to a very specific name. She watched the horrified understanding dawn in Hermione's face, but felt compelled to say it out loud anyway. "Worrac. It's Carrow spelled backwards."

NIR

Later that night, Harry walked slowly down to the front doors. It felt almost odd to be in the castle without Ginny at his side; she had somehow become his constant companion whenever Hermione wasn't around. But even he, who knew next to nothing about dating, knew that asking another girl along on a date was a big no-no, and besides, she'd mentioned having plans with Neville and Luna that night. So he swallowed his nerves, dressed in his nicest pair of jeans and a warm jumper, and went down to meet Susan by himself. His stomach was churning with anxiety when he rounded the corner and saw that she was waiting for him. Harry wiped his damp palms on his jeans and went down the stairs, fighting the urge to turn and

run back to Gryffindor Tower. He was in the middle of contemplating just such an escape when Susan spotted him.

"Harry!" she said happily, her eyes lighting up. "I was wondering if you were going to show up."

"I thought we had a date?" Harry said uncertainly. Had she not wanted him to show up after all? Maybe he should have risked a retreat while she had been staring off into space.

Susan smiled and took a step towards him. "Yes, of course we do. I just didn't know if... Well, you know what? It doesn't matter. Come on. I thought we would take a walk around the lake and talk for a little while. Does that sound good?"

He shrugged and nodded. "Sure."

The two of them headed out the doors in silence, emerging from the warmth of the castle into the cool, misty evening air. Susan pulled her sweater around her shoulders and shivered. Harry glanced at her, then pulled out his wand and cast a quick warming charm on both of them. He felt uncomfortable with the resulting smile that she flashed and pretended not to notice as he tucked his wand back into his jeans and started walking towards the lake. She fell into step beside him without saying a word, and that was how it continued until they were nearly a quarter of the way around. By that time, he'd realized that it was either continue on in silence or be the one to break it, and the lack of talk was starting to make him feel edgy.

"So... how was your day?" he asked lamely.

"Huh? Oh, it was pretty good. I had a double Potions class this morning and I actually managed to get through a whole class without getting yelled at once. Can you believe it?" she replied with a wry look. She'd tied her hair into two braids, and she fiddled with one as she added, "Though it was a close call. I think the only reason he ignored me was because Avery Fisher burned a hole in the floor."

Harry snorted, unable to avoid the grin that spread across his face. "I bet Snape was pissed."

"That's one word for it. He turned a very unbecoming shade of Gryffindor red," Susan said, chuckling. "I haven't heard him yell that much in a long time."

That seemed to end the conversation. Desperately, he cast around for something else to say, wondering why she was so hard to talk to. What could they talk about? Quidditch? As far as he knew, Susan didn't have a vested interest in the game. He didn't even know if she attended the matches. Some students didn't, after all. There was no point in asking about her plans for the weekend; with Hogsmeade closed, most of the students were reduced to hanging around the castle. Harry glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and then hurriedly looked away, wishing he'd thought to ask Hermione or Ginny what you were supposed to talk about on a date.

"So..." he began again, though he really had no idea what he was going to add to that.

"Harry, may I ask you something?" Susan said suddenly.

"Of course," he said eagerly, relieved that she appeared to be willing to meet him halfway. Had he known what she was about to ask, he wouldn't have been quite so pleased.

"Are you in love with Ginny?"

His foot chose that moment to catch at a dip in the ground. Harry landed hard on the grass, which was actually very fortunate – he'd stopped breathing when Susan asked her question, and the jolt of landing was harsh enough to start his lungs up again. He found himself gasping for breath as Susan fretted above him and retrieved his glasses, apologies spilling out left and right. After hastily cleaning his glasses and sliding them back onto his nose, her worried face came into focus, and he was able to get back to his feet, no worse for the wear than a pair of stiff knees and slightly skinned palms.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to just blurt it out like that." Susan tugged lightly on her hair. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Harry muttered. "What did you... Why would you... I just... What?"

Her cheeks turned pink and she glanced away. "Well, I just... I had to ask. I don't want to get into a relationship with anyone that's already hung up on someone else. That happened to me once this summer, and it was dreadful. Really not an experience that I would fancy repeating anytime soon, if ever. So I just thought I would ask before anything happened."

Harry rubbed his head, which had begun to ache. "Why Ginny?"

"What?" She blinked, looking startled.

"Why Ginny? Why not Hermione? That's who everyone always seems to think that I like." He adjusted his glasses, remembering with a sour expression his fourth year.

"I've been hearing rumours about you two," Susan said quietly. "Everyone knows what she did. I mean, she chose you over her own family. And you two were found sleeping together in the Gryffindor Common Room... then Zacharias told me that he saw you walking through the halls together holding hands... and really, I never see you anymore without her beside you. I don't know what that sounds like to you, but to me, it sounds like you're together. Or at the very least, like you like her. Am I right?"

"No!" Harry said immediately, unable to explain why the very notion of him and Ginny together in... that way... made him feel so strange. "We're just friends, that's all."

"Really," Susan said in a disbelieving tone, shooting him a doubtful look. "You don't know that Ginny –"

"That Ginny what?" he pressed when she fell silent.

Susan looked at him for a long time. "Never mind," she said with a sigh, shaking her head. She turned away and started walking again, muttering something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like, "The good ones are always taken."

"What did you say?" Harry asked suspiciously, easily catching up to her.

"Nothing," Susan said brightly, flipping a braid over one slender shoulder. There was a weird smile on her face. "I didn't say anything at all."

Harry frowned slightly, but agreed to let the subject matter drop. He no longer felt like making an effort to speak to her, and the end result of it was that neither of the two said a single word during the rest of their jaunt around the lake. Susan kept sending him suspicious looks when she thought he wasn't looking, and it was driving him mad. It was clear that she hadn't quite believed his furious denial, and short of dragging her over to Ginny and prompting the redhead to reaffirm his thoughts, he didn't know what else to do. Him and Ginny? The very idea was laughable. Sure, the girl had had a crush on him when they were younger, but she'd grown up and moved on. Hermione had said so.

And of course, Hermione was always right. A familiar flash of red-gold made Harry's head snap around so fast his neck began to ache. His eyes narrowed slightly at seeing Ginny and Neville emerging from one of the Greenhouses near the edge of the lake. There was no sign of Luna, and Ginny was laughing and saying something to Neville, who was nodding enthusiastically. After a moment, he reached out to put a hand on something she was holding in her hands - or at least, he hoped it was something she was holding, because otherwise, Neville had just grabbed her hand. The sight was making him feel strange and he didn't understand why, but it was not a pleasant feeling.

"Oh, look at that," Susan breathed, coming to a stop as she followed Harry's gaze. "Hmm, maybe you were being honest after all. I'm sorry for being so quiet, Harry. What do you say we..." Her voice trailed off when she turned to look at him, and she quickly took a step or two away. "You know what, I'm chilled. I think we should go inside."

"You do that," Harry muttered, shoving his hands in his pockets. He wavered, torn between approaching the two of them – because they were his friends, and there was nothing wrong with that, right? – and turning away. Ginny made the decision for him when she turned to head back into the castle and spotted the two of them. Her hand rose in an excited wave. Susan responded somewhat less enthusiastically, but it was still enough to prompt Neville and Ginny to walk over to them.

"Hey, how is it going?" Ginny asked pleasantly.

"Fine," Harry muttered, eyeing her silently. She shot him a puzzled look that he didn't really know how to respond to. Finally, he pretended not to notice and looked at Neville, forcing a smile. "Heard you got a new plant. It was nice of you to invite Luna and Ginny to see it."

Neville brightened. "Yeah, I did. Luna couldn't come because she got detention, but Ginny did." He shot Ginny a look that Harry didn't know how to interpret. "One of my aunts sent it to me as a late birthday present. I asked Professor Sprout if I could keep it in the Greenhouse because Gillyweed needs special soil to grow. If you don't have the right environment, it spoils."

"Gillyweed?" Susan exclaimed. "You've got Gillyweed? Can I see?"

"You want to?" said Harry, raising an eyebrow. He well remembered Gillyweed from the Tournament. It had been slimy and disgusting and left a noxious smell on his fingers that had taken hours to get off. His hands had resembled over-large prunes by the time he was finished, and the smell had still lingered for another week or so.

Susan shot him an incredulous look. "Of course I do. Gillyweed is incredibly rare. I've never seen a potted one before. You don't mind, do you?"

Shaking his head, Harry motioned for her to go, hoping that the relief he felt in watching Susan walk away arm in arm with Neville didn't show on his face. She was a perfectly nice girl, but it had been clear from the moment that they met in the castle that nothing was going to happen between them, especially after she started making such ridiculous accusations about him and Ginny. Really. He and Ginny? The very idea was laughable. Yes, that's what it was. Harry nodded to himself and glanced at Ginny, who was watching Susan and Neville walk away with a half-smile curving her lips. The fading light caught her hair just so, turning it into a cascade of golden fire that made her eyes sparkle. He swallowed hard. Laughable. Yes. That's right.

Please review!

A/N: You're all so funny. I've had many requests to beat Harry over the head with a stick. I know, but at least Harry has moved past completely oblivious into denial territory - we're slowly but surely getting there. A couple of people inquired about the possibility of a Susan/Neville pairing. I'm not sure whether they'll become official or not, but hey, feel free to dream about what the two of them actually went to the Greenhouse for! Enjoy!

Harry had been avoiding Ginny. Hermione rubbed the bridge of her nose with two fingers, silently asking whatever gods that might be listening to give her strength. No, wait. Strength was a bad idea when she wanted to beat her best friend into the floor. Patience was better. Merlin knew she'd be sorely in need of some by the time she was done speaking to Harry. Not only had he been purposely avoiding Ginny for the past two days, but he'd also been dodging Hermione in the process. Well, that was certainly enough of that. Frowning slightly, she leaned against the wall and waited patiently, knowing that sooner or later, Harry would sneak by on his way down to Potions, hoping to arrive just in time for Snape to begin the class.

Sure enough, about five minutes later, she heard the tell-tale squeak of Harry's trainers on the floor. Hermione smiled a little. Men. They were so predictable sometimes. "Impedimenta!"

"Fuck!" Harry swore loudly as ropes appeared out of nowhere and snapped around his wrists, ankles, and upper body, sending him crashing to the floor face first. Hermione edged out from the alcove where she had been hiding and fought down the slightly vindictive sense that flashed through her when he yelped with pain. Okay, he deserved that, but she was pretty sure she wasn't supposed to derive so much pleasure from it.

"Alright?" she asked casually, like there was nothing out of the ordinary about her ambushing him in the hall.

"Hermione!" Harry sounded both shocked and relieved, a curious combination that was quite out of sorts with the deadly glare he shot at her when he lifted his head off of the ground. "What the bloody hell do you think you're doing? You nearly gave me a heart attack. I thought you were a Death Eater or someone like that."

"Sorry," she said breezily. "I needed to speak to you, and I couldn't help noticing that you've been avoiding me."

He froze. That, in hindsight, was pretty damn hard to do when you're trussed up on the floor like a chicken, so she gave him props for effort. "I... Well, that is... I've been... busy. With homework."

"Good to see that you still suck at lying," Hermione said with a roll of her eyes, giving a casual flick of her wand. He rose up off of the floor and hovered in place behind her. She sauntered down the hall with her cursing best friend right behind her, and made it all the way up to the Room of Requirement without running into a single student. Normally, the thought of missing a class would have sent her into a tailspin of worry, but she had the feeling that this was going to end up being way more important. And besides, it was Potions. No Gryffindor could ever feel too badly about missing that.

"What are you doing? Un-tie me!" he was hissing as she opened the door and entered. "I'll talk to you."

"I know you will." She pointed her wand at the couch and released it when he was hovering over the surface. He landed with a thump and another curse. Hermione shut the door and then moved over so that she was looming over him. "But first, you're going to listen to me, Harry Potter. I don't know what's wrong with you lately. Really, I'd be willing to just let it go and hope you'd figure it out on your own. But Ginny has been trying to be your friend for the past five years. She has made sacrifices for you that you can't even begin to imagine. So you had better have a damned good excuse for why you've been ignoring her for the past two days, or I'm going to have a little target practice with some of the meaner spells I found while looking up information on Ron!"

Green eyes widened with alarm. "Hermione, are you alright?"

Hermione sighed and sat down beside him, all of her anger draining out of her in a flash. "Harry, what's going on? You used to tell me everything, but now every time I turn around, you and Ginny have some new secret." She held up her hand to forestall the protest and argument she knew was coming. "Don't even bother to deny it. Really, I don't even mind. I was happy that the two of you were getting closer, and if you prefer to confide in her as opposed to me, well... I won't say that it doesn't hurt because it does, but I always knew that it was something I'd have to get used to eventually. But

for the past two days, you haven't talked to me or Ginny, and I don't like it. I'm worried about you."

"I can't tell you," he mumbled, averting his gaze.

"Why not?" Purposely, she softened her voice, knowing that one of Harry's greatest weaknesses was an innate desire for comfort, borne from years of being ignored and outright neglected as a child. She patted his hand and said, "Harry, you know that you can tell me anything. Maybe I can help. At the very least, it will make you feel better to talk."

Stubbornly, he still refused. "I really don't want to talk about it. Please, could you un-tie me? If I miss another Potions class, Snape might just follow through on his threat to kick me out of it."

"No." Lips pressing together, Hermione frowned at him. "You can tell me now or we can sit here until you decide to talk, but one way or another, you're going to explain before you leave this room. You're upsetting Ginny and I want to know why."

Harry stiffened slightly and turned to look back at her. "Ginny's upset?"

Hmm. Hermione filed that response away and nodded. "Yes, of course she is. Merlin, Harry, did you think that you two could become friends and then you could just start ignoring her out of the blue with no explanation without her becoming worried? She thinks that she's done something wrong to make you angry. It would be like if I got up tomorrow and decided that I wanted nothing to do with you but didn't want to tell you why, and every time you tried to ask, I avoided you." She studied him for a long moment. "Does this have anything to do with your date with Susan?"

"No!" His shoulders tensed. "Why would you ask that?"

"Because you started acting weird right after," Hermione answered calmly, knowing that she'd hit the nail with the proverbial hammer. Clearly the date had not gone the way Harry and Susan had intended. Something had gone wrong. The question was, what? "Did you two not have a good time? What did you do?"

"We just walked around the lake a bit, that's all," Harry said warily, willing to talk so long as she didn't mention the redhead. "We met up with Neville and when Susan heard that he had some Gillyweed in Professor Sprout's greenhouse, she got all excited and decided that she'd rather go see it instead of walking back to the castle with me. I haven't spoken to her since that, so I'm guessing we're not going out again." He didn't sound overly disappointed about that fact.

"Didn't Ginny say that she was going to see Neville's new plant with him?" she asked causally, eyes narrowing further when he shifted away from her slightly. Bingo. Her mind raced, putting all of the facts together and coming up with what she had suspected from the very beginning. There had been rumours spreading throughout the castle about the true nature of the relationship between Harry and Ginny. The date hadn't gone well. Susan had ditched Harry to go off with Neville when they met up with Neville and Ginny. Harry had been avoiding Ginny. A slow smile curved her lips, but she made an effort to keep the amusement from surfacing in her voice when she said, "Harry, did Susan by any chance ask you about your relationship with Ginny?"

He practically choked. "What? W-Why would you ask that?"

"Because the whole school has been talking about it at every opportunity," Hermione said wryly, releasing his bonds with a flick of her wand. Instead of taking off for the door, his shoulders slumped in dismay.

"Great," he muttered. "That's just what I need. You know, Susan asked me if I was in love with Ginny." He sounded so bitter about that statement that Hermione couldn't help shooting him a surprised look. "I told her she was crazy but she didn't believe me. Then we met up with Neville and Ginny, and I..."

"You what?" she prompted.

"I felt..." Harry trailed off again and shook his head wildly. He leapt to his feet and started pacing back and forth rapidly. "This makes no sense, Hermione. I didn't even think about her like – like that – until Susan mentioned it. But now every time I see her, that's all I can think about."

The urge to break down into laughter seized Hermione quite unexpectedly. She couldn't quite stop it and a giggle escaped before she could clap a hand to her mouth. Harry whirled around to stare at her suspiciously. Quickly, she put on a straight face and said, "Harry, are you telling me that you actually like Ginny that way?"

"No! Yes. No. I don't know. Maybe. No." With that confusing array of answers in place, he flopped back down onto the couch and stared up at the ceiling, looking lost. "Ginny always used to be Ron's vaguely annoying little sister. Then she became a friend, last year, but not like you or Ron. But this year, she's become the kind of friend that only you and Ron used to be. Only now I don't think of her the way I think of you. You're like my sister and she's... Well... she's Ginny." Harry looked quite miserable.

"Harry," Hermione said gently, making an effort to sound as kind as possible. "There's really nothing wrong with liking Ginny in a romantic way. You two are very close friends, and she understands you in a way that most other girls wouldn't, considering that she had a close-up encounter with Tom Riddle in her first year. Look," she twisted towards him and put a hand on his, "it's fine if you don't know how you're feeling yet, but you absolutely cannot ignore Ginny just because you're confused. It's not fair to either of you. How do you expect to figure out what you feel for her if you avoid her?"

He didn't say anything for a long moment. Then he sighed. "I guess I can't. Ginny probably hates me now."

"I don't think she could hate you if she wanted to, though by now, it's probably not for lack of trying," she replied frankly. "Do me a favour, Harry. Leave this room, go down to the Charms classroom, and wait for Ginny. When you see her, apologize for being such a prat and make up with her. Regardless of whether you decide you like her or not, don't let this ruin your friendship. You need her more than you realize."

A sheepish smile spread over Harry's face as he raked his fingers through his hair. "I guess I've been a bit of an idiot," he admitted sheepishly. "It just... freaked me out. I'm not used to thinking of Ginny as anything other than a friend. Every time I see her, my stomach feels like it's tied up in knots. Kind of what I felt for Cho, but... different."

"You don't have to figure it out right away," she said placidly, hoping that her calm expression hid the excitement that had flashed through her. "Go on. Make me proud."

Harry stood up and looked at her a little awkwardly before he leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Thank you, Hermione," he said quietly.

Hermione smiled to herself as he left the room, pleased that she had finally gotten an opportunity to speak to him. Imagine! Harry Potter was falling for Ginny – had, quite possibly, fallen for her already from the sound of it – and she was one of the first people to know. She hugged the delicious information to herself and took a few minutes to imagine Ginny's reaction if Harry ever got up the nerve to tell her. Shock and disbelief, most likely. As far as Hermione knew, Ginny had never really imagined what might happen if Harry actually grew to love her back. The redhead probably wouldn't know what to do with herself.

"Lucky Ginny," she sighed, tying her hair back in a loose ponytail. Shaking off all thoughts of their blooming relationship, she reached for the stack of books on the table. Harry hadn't noticed their titles in his confused state, and she was glad for it. She didn't want to tell him about the possibility of the Carrows being involved quite yet. It would only make him that much more distracted, and neither she nor Tonks could be completely sure about Alexander Worrac. The whole Worrac/Carrow thing seemed to be too much of a coincidence, but more research would be required before they could be completely sure.

"Carrow... Carrow..." Flipping open one of her notebooks, Hermione looked down at the neatly scrawled lists. One of the more interesting parts of being a Prefect, at least as far as she was concerned, was the opportunity to have access to the official student list of Hogwarts. The name 'Carrow' had been familiar for more than one reason. Flora and Hestia Carrow were students in Ginny's year, though they were both Slytherins. Not for the first time, she wondered if the two of them were related to the Dark part of the Carrow family that had supported Voldemort during his reign of terror.

A little research into the Carrow family had given Hermione more than enough reason to worry. According to what she'd found, the Carrow family was primarily halfbloods who had been split straight down the middle in terms of supporting Voldemort. Alecto and

Amycus Carrow in particular had been desperate, cruel Death Eaters that had delighted in causing pain and havoc. They had avoided Azkaban after Voldemort's original fall by being two of many who had claimed to have been controlled by the Imperious Curse. There was also some speculation that the two of them had blackmailed Lucius Malfoy into paying for their Ministry fees, as apparently the Dark side of the Carrow family had been nearly ruined by Voldemort's defeat. Interestingly enough, Ulric Carrow, their brother, had been one of the biggest supporters when it came to the imprisonment of his siblings, and there had been documentation stating that he'd claimed that the "Ministry would regret letting them go free".

Hestia and Flora were Ulric's daughters, so it was likely that they followed after his (strong) opinions, but there was always the smallest chance that they were Voldemort supporters. She jotted down a note to speak to them at the soonest possible convenience and turned her attention back to Alexander Worrac. If he was a Carrow, why had he made his name so obvious? Anyone could make the connection, though it appeared that Hermione and Tonks were the first ones to have done so. Polyjuice could make so many things possible... There was no way of even telling whether Worrac had really been Worrac or someone posing as him. Perhaps that was something that Hestia or Flora could confirm for her...?

"Like a Slytherin would willingly confirm something for me," she muttered out loud, a small smile playing about her lips. "Maybe I'd better ask Ginny." Once or twice, she'd noticed the redhead talking to a couple of the snakes in the halls. They didn't seem overly friendly, but Ginny might have a better chance at talking to them than she would.

Basically, she'd hit another dead end until she spoke to some people, and she couldn't go any further by herself. It was immensely frustrating to hold so many loose ends in her hands and not know how to tie them together. Stretching her hands over her head, she rubbed the back of her neck and sighed. "I need a way to find out whether or not Alexander Worrac was actually a Carrow."

Witch or not, Hermione still jumped when the book magically shimmered into place before her. She blinked down at the book and picked it up slowly, her eyes flitting over the title. Genetics + DNA = Magic? "Oh my god, I love this room," she breathed, flipping it open

immediately. Her eyes darted across the pages, and as soon as she had found what she was looking for, she leapt to her feet and shot out of the room. Dinner wasn't that far off, and there was no way that she could wait to cast her spell until the meal was over with.

NIR

Charms had always been one of Ginny's best and favourite subjects, but on that day, she couldn't have said what the lesson was about for a million galleons. Her mind was a hundred miles away, and focused completely on none other than Harry Potter. His avoidance of her stung, especially after Ron and a couple of other Gryffindors had noticed and taken to teasing her for falling out of grace with the Saviour. She didn't understand what she had done to make Harry angry with her. Was it the date with Susan? Had something gone wrong and now he was blaming her for it? Or maybe...

A cold feeling gripped her stomach and she squirmed. Surely Harry hadn't discovered that she was in love with him, right? There was no possible way for him to know that. Yet it had been niggling at the back of her mind ever since he had started avoiding her. The possibility that Harry might have found out and didn't know how to turn her down gently was mortifying. She didn't think he'd be disgusted, but afraid of hurting her feelings and destroying their friendship? Yes, that was exactly the sort of thing that Harry would feel. Ginny tapped her wand on the desk anxiously, paying no attention to the resulting jet of sparks that Astoria had to put out with a thin burst of water. The second the class was released, she was out of there like a shot before Astoria could corner her.

She was not expecting to run into Harry just outside of the class. Literally. Ginny stumbled backwards and would have fallen on her arse were it not for the fact that, at the very last second, Harry's hands shot out and grabbed her elbows. The combined force of her weight and the fall caused Harry to stumble forward. He very nearly lost his balance as well, and only just managed to catch himself at the last instant by jamming his shoulder into a crack in the stone wall. After a moment of frozen staring at each other, he carefully straightened and set her back on her feet.

"Sorry about that, Gin," he muttered.

"You're sorry? For avoiding me or making me trip?" Ginny said. The caustic comment had slipped out without her permission, and she felt a tiny bit guilty when he flinched, but she ruthlessly pushed the feeling down. Considering how he'd been acting towards her the past few days, she was shocked that he hadn't yet taken off down the hall.

"About both," Harry said, looking down into her face intently. He still hadn't released her, and he didn't look like he was planning to anytime soon, even though a couple of students who were leaving had given them odd looks. No doubt rumours of their position and what it meant would be all over the castle in a few minutes. "Look, Ginny, I've been a real prat during the past couple of days. I was trying to figure some things out and... Well, I guess I have no real excuse. I'm just hoping you'll forgive me."

Ginny knew she shouldn't. What she should do was slap him, or quite possibly give him a knee where it would really hurt, and then walk away until he told her why. But she could see the sincerity in his eyes, and he did seem to feel badly. She couldn't quite bring herself to walk away, though she wasn't entirely ready to forgive him, either. "I guess I can understand that," she said reluctantly. "But one day, Harry Potter, I want to know just what it was you were trying to figure out."

Harry winced and finally let go of her so that he could straighten his glasses. "Honestly, even though you deserve to know, I hope you never find out."

That was an interesting comment. Ginny raised her eyebrows, truly curious, but knew better than to push. "I've been trying to track you down to tell you that we should move on to the next step of your shield lessons. Unlike you like having Dumbledore root around in your mind at every opportunity," she added wryly.

"No, not particularly," he said. "Room of Requirement?"

Shaking her head, Ginny stepped around him and started down the hall. "We'll go outside," she said. She didn't want to go back to a room where she had slept in his arms. It would make her forgive him too easily.

Disregarding the fact that they were missing another set of classes, the two of them made their way down to the front doors and out onto the grounds. It was a surprisingly warm day for late October, as the sun was shining quite brightly. Ginny threw her head back with a happy sigh, luxuriating in the feel of the warmth. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Harry stare at her for a long moment before he suddenly looked away and swallowed hard. She frowned inwardly, wondering what that was about. Merlin but Harry was frustrating to be around sometimes. The boy was a mass of contradictions and a complete mystery no matter how close the two of them got. Would she ever figure him out?

"How about over there?"

"Huh?" Ginny blinked, snapping out of her reverie, and followed his finger down to a small patch of grass near the edge of the lake. It wasn't far from the tree where she and Astoria often went to sit. "Sure, that will work."

Once the two of them had sat down and Harry had cast a couple of warming and drying charms, he turned to Ginny expectantly. "Well?"

"Um..." She smiled weakly and thought furiously, trying to remember how she and Astoria had begun. Their shields had been partly built through partner magic, but she knew that wouldn't work for Harry. It would be too dangerous for him to depend on someone else's magic, no matter what kind of power boost he would get from it. "Basically, you're going to be creating shields for your mind. It's different from Occlumency in that you're shielding everything instead of just specific thoughts. Now, shielding can work in conjunction with Occlumency, but it's quite dangerous. And anyway, I can't teach that to you because I don't know how to use it." Fidgeting a little, she combined her fingers through her hair and added, "True masters have several layers of shields, but that takes years of practice. I only have a few layers, and some of them aren't very strong."

"Anything you can teach me is better than what I've got," he pointed out. "Right now, I'm an open book to anyone who wants to attack me."

Ginny nodded. "Okay, well, I guess maybe I should show you one of my shields. I can't really help you create them, but I can give you an

idea of what one could look like. Start with meditation, okay? And when you're ready, I'll pull you in."

Although he seemed to be puzzled by her choice of words, Harry nodded and obediently closed his eyes. Ginny watched him for a moment longer, pleased with how quickly his breathing slowed and deepened into a regular pattern. He had clearly been practicing. She then faced forward, her eyes on the lake, and felt herself fall into that quiet state of peace in the span of a few heartbeats. Unconsciously, she began breathing in tune with Harry as her hand reached out and their fingers intertwined. Magically, she gave a gentle pull, and heard Harry's sharper intake of air shortly before the world blurred away.

They were standing in the middle of what appeared to be a beach. Harry looked around, awed by the realistic sight. "What - ?"

She took one look at his bewildered face and burst out laughing. "This is the first layer of my shield," she said, eyes twinkling with amusement. Spreading her arms, she indicated the vast space and added, "Anyone who is inexperienced with prying at shields will be pulled in here. If they keep pressing their luck, the ocean, which is one of my defences, will swallow them. The fortunate ones just get spat back into their bodies. Those that aren't... well..." A slow, evil smirk hinted at what would happen to the others.

"What about those who are experienced? Like Dumbledore or Snape?" Harry asked, fascinated. This was nothing like Occlumency had been.

"Those two would be able to bypass this defence without getting sucked in here," she answered. "When Dumbledore was using Occlumency on me, he tore through this shield easily. After all, this is only my first shield and it's not necessarily the best one. There are flaws if you know what to look for. But then again, sometimes having this kind of shield makes people think you don't know what you're doing. Leaves them open to for a retaliation." Ginny started walking away from the ocean. Harry tried to follow, but discovered that with every step, his feet sank so deeply into the sand that he couldn't move. When she saw his problem, Ginny laughed again. "Sorry. The sand is a defence of mine, too."

Shaking his head in amusement, he knelt and plunged a hand into the sand, intending to try and work his feet free. The second his fingers touched the granules, he froze, his expression becoming vacant. Ginny waited patiently until he came to again. Then she walked over and held her hand out to him. She wasn't worried about the memory that Harry had seen. Rudimentary users of Occlumency or shielding would think that they had found her store of memories embedded in the scenery, but she'd used only the basic, more trivial memories to throw them off, like ones from her childhood. The important ones were hidden.

"What... what was that?" Harry sounded shaky as he slid his hand into hers and stood up again. Now that Ginny was holding onto him, he was able to move around easily.

"Something else for distraction," she replied. "You should know that this is all just an example, Harry. You can form your shields however you want. Your magic will listen to you once you know how to shape it, and you're only limited by your imagination. Some of the books I gave you will warn against using these kinds of metaphysical shields because it can be a drain on your magic to create it, but I found it useful when I was just starting out to have something more concrete to focus on. The abstract can be hard to wrap your mind around at first. I'll lend you a few more books that will give you a few more details how to create them. I started out working to shield against possession. But you're looking to shield from Occlumency, which is a little different."

"It's amazing, even if it's not exactly what I have to do," Harry told her. Seeing the awe in his eyes was a thrill. "I don't understand why Dumbledore never told me about this kind of thing. Shields make so much more sense than Occlumency."

"I don't know," Ginny replied honestly. She wanted to give him an explanation, but really, she couldn't think of one that made sense. Shielding was difficult, but it would be no big issue for someone like Harry. "A shield like this won't faze someone like Voldemort. He'll see it as a thin layer and won't get drawn in. But at least now you know what a shield can look like."

"And it was a lot more fun than 'clear your mind' followed by an attack," he said wryly, turning to look at her. She caught her breath at the excitement gleaming in his emerald eyes. "Thank you, Ginny."

Maybe now I'll finally be able to get a good night's sleep when you're not around."

Ginny swallowed hard, hoping that he couldn't feel the way she'd just shivered. "I'm always available as a teddy bear if required," she joked.

His eyes widened briefly, and then his head tilted to the side. An almost assessing look spread over his face for a moment, but it vanished so quickly that Ginny was left wondering if she had imagined it. "I'll keep that in mind," he replied. "Now, how do we get out of here? For the first time in my life, I'm interested in reading a book that's not about Quidditch or familial bonds, and Merlin knows how long the feeling will last for."

She was still laughing when the beautiful scenery of the beach faded around them. Part of it was from giddiness borne from the relief that Harry had not asked to see any more of her shields. They were intensely private – of course, they were shields – and she didn't want to risk him finding out what lay beneath them. His hand was warm in hers as she felt reality settling in around them. Ginny opened her eyes and looked out at the lake, realizing that an hour or two had passed while the two of them meditated together. Harry released her hand and stretched, working the kinks out of his back by rolling his shoulders.

"Want to go raid the kitchens for something to eat?" he asked. His emerald eyes were dancing in the late afternoon sunlight. She felt herself smiling back before she could stop it.

"Sure," she agreed, accepting his offered hand. He pulled her to her feet and started walking back towards the castle. Ginny fell into step beside him, wondering if he realized that their hands were still connected. If he didn't, she wasn't going to mention it, because this was her version of bliss – and she was afraid that it was as close as she was ever going to get.

Please review!

A/N: Thanks for all of the reviews, everyone. I'm glad that you guys liked Ginny's first shield. I had a heck of a time with that scene, let me tell you. This chapter gave me similar problems. I thought for a long time about whether or not I would introduce this concept, and I wavered a lot, let me tell you. But the story seemed to naturally lead in this direction, so I decided to run with it. Let me know what you think. This would have been posted last night, but the crash prevented me from doing so (and it just about killed me). Enjoy!

Harry Potter crossed his legs and leaned forward intently as he flipped through one of the books that Ginny had lent him. She'd given them to him with endless warnings about how she didn't know whether it would work against the link he had with Voldemort. At this point, Harry didn't care. He was desperate for something - anything - that would give him an edge against Voldemort and, more and more lately, Dumbledore. He was willing to give shielding a shot if it had even a slight chance of working.

The books were more informative than he'd expected. A few of them, which he had paid special attention to, went into a lot of depth about the different kinds of shields that people could create. It was fascinating to read about the different shields witches and wizards had created over the centuries. Essentially, your imagination was the limit as long as your magical and mental powers were strong enough, and shields could be comprised of anything, even a solid set of memories, or emotions, or... the possibilities were truly endless.

Even though the subject as a whole was fascinating, Harry had been attracted to one idea in particular: the concept of elemental shields. Ginny hadn't mentioned them, but one of the books had touched briefly on the topic and explained that they were one of the more difficult shields to create, but extremely powerful and handy. Most people tended to have control over one element that was an innate part of their magic, and the tricky part was drawing that element out in order to form a shield. Harry touched the page that described them with wistful fingers, wondering which of the elements would have been his. He allowed himself a few moments to daydream about having that kind of power before he snapped himself out of it. That was some time away, maybe never if Snape's belief about his abilities were to be believed, and he didn't have the time to sit there mooning over it.

"Okay, let's get down to this," he muttered nervously. Part of what was so difficult about shields was the lack of incantations. There were no spells, no wands, and no potions like he was used to; it all depended on an individual witch's or wizard's power. He closed his eyes and began to regulate his breathing. It was much easier now that he was used to it, and his mind cleared quickly. Just like the books had directed, he fell into that space deep inside himself that no one, not even Voldemort, could touch. That was where his magic blazed like an unstoppable inferno, always ready at his back and call.

Cautiously, he reached out and cupped the ball, wincing at the crackling strength that washed over him. He'd never felt like he was a particularly powerful wizard, and indeed, he'd always felt average when being compared to the rest of his classmates. But now, looking at the source of his power, he wondered if he'd been unconsciously selling himself short. Engrained lessons from childhood were hard to let go, and he'd been taught at a young age that standing out meant pain and humiliation once his relatives found out about it. With these kinds of resources, Harry should have been able to achieve most spells a lot more easily than he did. If he could have smiled, he would have; apparently, now he was even working against himself.

Gently, taking care not to grab too much, he teased out a strand of power and pulled it along. Part of meditation was clearing and sorting the mind, and he'd already noticed a difference in being able to think more clearly; his head no longer felt like balls of cotton had been stuffed inside. Now the next step was to form a shield around his mind and prevent anyone else from gaining access to it unless he wanted them to. Gingerly, feeling like he was spinning a web of some kind, Harry started to form the power with his 'hands'... and stopped. A web, he thought excitedly, remembering the hours he'd spent as a child watching the kind spiders in his cupboard. How many flies had he watched being captured? Of course. It made so much more sense than just blindly draping power here and there and hoping it would keep Voldemort out, which was all he'd felt capable of.

His power stung a little as he began the process of weaving, but Harry was oblivious to the pain. He wove quickly and expertly considering that he'd never done it before, using the hours of memories of watching the spiders to fuel the strength in his shield. The web began to form gradually. It was thin, and probably wouldn't

do much good against a master Occlumens like Dumbledore or Voldemort, but it was a beginning. Harry laid it gently around his mind, knowing that if anyone so much as tugged at one of the slender, gossamer-like strands, he would be alerted. He'd watched spiders catch dozens of flies that way, and just like a spider, he would have to patiently re-make his web every night until it was strong enough to work for him.

By the time he opened his eyes hours later, it was morning. His back was cramping fiercely from sitting in one place all night, his eyes throbbed with pain, and his stomach was growling fiercely for food. But none of that mattered; Harry was far too pleased with himself, and it showed in his broad smile as he climbed off of his bed and quickly changed into a fresh uniform. It was only when his hands stung as he pulled his pants on that he noticed the vivid stripes of red that had burned across the palms of his hands, like he'd been holding something extremely hot. Raising an eyebrow, Harry examined the welts closely, realizing that they felt similar to the burns he'd received as a child whenever he was careless and accidentally touched the stove. Perhaps what he did with his mental self was replicated on his physical self? That was something interesting to be examined at a later date, but not when he was so excited and bursting to share the news of his success.

He practically bounced down to the Great Hall, which seemed to be unusually empty until he realized what time it was. It was just barely half past six, and most of the students would still be in bed for a while yet. Fortunately, the one student he was interested in seeing was sitting at the table, staring moodily down at a book. Harry paid no attention to Ginny's pissed expression as he walked up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. When she turned around, he grabbed her, lifted her off of the bench, and spun her around, heedless of the pain it caused in his hands. Ginny yelped in surprise and wrapped her arms around his neck for extra support, her eyes wide with surprise.

"What are you doing?" she asked breathlessly, startled into laughing as he stopped and put her back down.

"That was a thank you for the progress I made last night," he whispered in return, glad that the few professors and students who were around weren't paying much attention to the two of them. He

was eager to share his other news as well, but for now he settled on watching realization dawn.

Her eyes lit up. "You made a shield!"

It was a strange feeling to know that someone was proud of him, and that there were no strings attached. Harry basked in it as he sat down beside her and began eagerly piling food onto his plate. For the past few weeks, nothing had looked appetizing, but now everything he did. He was utterly ravenous and couldn't wait to sink his teeth into a pile of scrambled eggs and sausage. "I spent all night on it," he said, finally answering her question when he could hold off no longer. "I didn't create a metaphysical shield like yours. I used some of my raw magic to weave a shield, like a spider would."

She got it right away. He could see it in her eyes. That was one of the things that he liked the most about Ginny. There was never any need to stop and explain things to her, like he had to with some of his other friends. It was like their minds were always working on the same level at the same time. Harry blushed slightly as those thoughts went through his mind, and he turned away, busily scooping up a piece of toast and cramming it into his mouth in a display worthy of Ron. As long as he didn't have to look at her, he could function normally, and he didn't have to think about... those thoughts.

"That's brilliant, Harry," Ginny said enthusiastically, seemingly not noticing his odd actions. "I'm so proud of you. I can't believe you were able to create your first shield in one night. It took Tori and I ages to learn how to do it the first time around."

Harry couldn't help preening a little. "I think it helped that you showed me your shield," he said modestly. "And I'm older than you were at the time."

"No doubt that has a part in it, but still, you're doing a wonderful job." She smiled broadly and reached for her goblet of pumpkin juice. "How does your magic feel?"

For the first time since he'd managed to create his shield, Harry turned his attention inward again. He was always aware of the presence of his magic now, and he couldn't figure out how he had been able to spend years ignoring it. Meditation had taught him to

become much more in tune with both his body and his magic. Cautiously, he prodded his magic, and was surprised when, instead of the normal sparks that the action would have brought on, he received only a sluggish pulse. The feeling made him so tired that he very nearly dropped forward into his breakfast. Blinking heavily, he pushed his glasses up and rubbed at his eyes.

"I think it wants a break," he said, muffling a yawn with his hand.

"I expected as much. Shielding is difficult work when you're noticed used to it. Here, make sure you eat some fruit. It will help," Ginny told him, shifting one of the baskets a bit closer.

Obligingly, he took an apple out of the basket and bit into it. He chewed the mouthful of fruit and swallowed, then looked at her pensively, wondering how she would take his next bit of news. "Hey, Gin. I've been looking into those books we borrowed from the library," he said hesitantly. "You know... the ones about the bonds?" It was the honest truth. When he wasn't working on meditation, schoolwork, or Quidditch, he'd been pouring through the books non-stop ever since he'd let Ginny in on his idea. The two days he'd been avoiding her, he'd had his nose buried in those books, scanning every page with the sort of frantic energy that was usually attributed to Hermione.

"Oh, yeah," she said, looking down at the table. There was a faint blush on her cheeks. Harry stared, forgetting where he was, until her head rose and she blinked at him curiously. "What about them?"

"Huh? Oh." Harry shook his head, snapping out of his daze. "I think I might have found a spell that would work. If you're still interested in becoming a part of the Potter family, I mean." He dropped his voice, speaking barely louder than a whisper. "If you don't, I think we could twist it so that you could become a Black instead. Either one would work." It was hard to avoid watching her closely. Part of him was still worried that she would decide that she didn't want to become a member of his family after all. Years of conditioning from the Dursleys was still proving hard to get rid of.

"Harry." Ginny smiled and reached over, patting his hand. It was both frightening and exhilarating to feel his heart pound beneath her soft touch. "Either one would be an honour, really. Whichever you're more comfortable with is fine with me. But... are you sure about

this? It's a big step, asking someone else to become a part of your family. How do you know I won't bring shame to your name?"

He snorted, unable to imagine her ever doing anything that could bring shame to anyone. "Somehow that's the least of my concerns," he said wryly, rubbing his free hand across the back of his neck. Between the achievement of having created his first shield and his triumph at having found a spell that would work, he felt flushed with success. "When do you want to... you know."

"I don't know." Looking surprisingly self-conscious, she fiddled with her fork. Harry watched her out of the corner of his eyes and refused to admit to himself that he thought it was adorable. "I don't have a lot to do this weekend – "

"Now." The word had slipped out without his permission, and he didn't blame Ginny for looking astonished. Now? It was completely sudden, and he wouldn't have blamed her for turning him down. She hadn't even looked at the spell, and he knew that it was a little foolhardy of them to cast anything that they didn't completely understand. It would have been smarter to have had Hermione look the spell over first. But he didn't want to. With everything that she had done for him, all that she had given him, he wanted to do this one thing for her more than anything else, and he wanted them to do it by themselves. "Are you free?"

"Um, yes. I suppose," Ginny said, her eyes still wide with surprise. "Harry. Are you certain? We only just started discussing this last week. There's no need to jump right into it just because you found the spell. I mean, I don't mind going without a family for a little while longer."

"I'm okay with doing it now," he replied. "But if you're not..."

"No!" she said quickly. "I'm... I'm looking forward to it. It will be nice... to have a family again, I mean."

Some small part of him warmed with the force of her shy smile, and he suddenly felt a little guilty for his ulterior motive. He couldn't help hoping that his changing feelings towards Ginny might disappear, or at least return to the way they'd been before, when she was a part of his family. Surely then he would start thinking of her the way he thought of Hermione, like she was his sister? It was awkward, and a

little frightening, to sit there and want nothing more than to lean over and kiss her. This was so much more than he'd ever felt for anyone, even Cho, and Harry wasn't used to that; he didn't think he'd ever be able to get used to it, and he had to do something about it before he gave in. Gryffindors were known for being impulsive and he was worried that part of him might take over and do something that he couldn't take back. Ginny was only just becoming his friend and he didn't want to lose her.

"Let's go, then," he said, rising to his feet and setting the core of the apple down on his plate. He rubbed his sweaty palms on his jeans. "We need a few things, but maybe the Room of Requirement can help supply some of them."

Ginny stood up and followed him out of the Great Hall. With only a brief detour to the Gryffindor Tower so that Harry could pick up the book and his Potions equipment, they proceeded to the Room of Requirement. His heart was pounding, and he wondered, briefly, if the two of them were making a foolish mistake by acting with such haste. But why wait any longer? He wasn't going to change his mind, and neither was Ginny. Both of them wanted this to happen. It was with that thought in mind that he pushed open the door to the Room of Requirement and stepped aside to let Ginny enter first. There was no anxiety in her face that he could see, only excitement, and that calmed him a little.

"This is it," he said, sitting down beside her on the couch. He opened the book to the correct page and handed her the translator that he'd also picked up. Like most of the books they'd borrowed, it was written in that strange old language that he didn't recognize. She smoothed the book open in her lap and looked down at the page with curiosity, her eyes scanning the lines he'd indicated, as well as what he had translated. After a moment or two, she did a few translations of her own and compared to them what he had found, her lips moving silently as she read. Finally, she looked up at him and nodded.

"I think it will work," she agreed, tucking a strand of fiery hair behind her ear. "From what I can tell, it sounds about right. This looks like a spell that will allow the Head of the Family – which would be you in both the Potter and Black families – to bring someone into the family." She rested her chin on her hand and frowned pensively.

"The only part I'm not sure about is this line here. D'you see?" Ginny shifted the book so that he could watch as well.

Harry looked down at the spot that she was indicating. He'd read the spell so many times that he didn't even need to look at the page to know what it said, but he obliged her by reading the line regardless. "I noticed that, too. I wasn't sure what it meant, but when I put that word through the translator, it came up with 'magic' or 'soul'. The one right before it means 'friend' or 'mate'. Any guesses?"

"Not really, but if you put it in conjunction with this part..." Her finger swept across the page to highlight another line. "According to the translator, that means 'family' and 'blood', and that bit over here means 'name' and 'belonging'. I think maybe the Head of the family has to have some sort of bond with the person?" Ginny sounded doubtful as she spoke, and Harry didn't blame her. Working with the old, unfamiliar language was much harder than it had originally appeared to be. It was so hard to know whether or not they were translating things properly, and the smallest mistake could be dangerous.

"So basically, the Head is the only person who could make someone a part of the family," he suggested.

She nodded, slowly at first, and then with more confidence. "Yes, I believe so. It makes sense when you think about it. They wouldn't have wanted just anyone to be able to do this... though apparently the opposite isn't a big deal." Ginny sat back, looking frustrated, and ran her fingers through her hair. "I just wish we had a version of this book we could read!" There was a beat of silence, and then - out of nowhere - a book fell into her lap. She jumped and looked down at the book in amazement before she reached down and picked it up. Upon seeing the title, her eyebrows rose. "Sometimes this room makes me feel like an idiot."

"Well, it is the Room of Requirement, I guess," said Harry sheepishly, unable to believe that asking the Room for the books that they needed had never occurred to him. He scooted a bit closer as Ginny opened the book to the page that they had been looking at. Sure enough, the spell and potion had been written out in plain English, including a detailed explanation for what the spell would do. It made him feel a bit better when he realized that the spell he'd found really was the one that they were looking for.

"Where are we going to get some of this stuff?" Ginny asked despairingly, flipping the page. "Like... powdered root of Asphodel? Honeywater? Unicorn horn? Dragon blood?" Her voice rang out with incredulity as she glanced at him. "Either you've been stocking up on Potions ingredients without telling me, or we've got some shopping to do before we can do this."

"Maybe not." He stood up and, holding the book out, said, "I need a place where can find all of these ingredients."

There was a moment's pause during which he thought it might not work - after all, there was only so much one could ask from even a Hogwarts room - but then, over on the far wall across from the bed, a door began to form. Harry grinned and walked over to it, pulling the door open. Inside was a space just large enough for he and Ginny to fit into, lined with shelves of Potions ingredients from the common to the extremely rare. He slotted himself inside and peered at the shelves, searching for the ingredients on his list. It didn't take him long to recognize the thin, spidery writing that covered each label, and his smirk became distinctly smugger as he handed each item to Ginny, who was waiting at the door take them. She shot him a suspicious look when she noticed his obvious pleasure.

"What?" she asked warily.

"The Room of Requirement just gave us a door to Snape's private potions cupboard," Harry replied. He restrained himself - just barely - from leaving a 'surprise' behind for the surly man. It wouldn't do to put either of them under suspicion, and when something went wrong for Severus Snape, Harry was always the one he turned on regardless of whether he had evidence or not.

Her eyes widened. "Seriously? Oh wow. He'd be furious if he knew. Thank Merlin the twins never figured out that the Room of Requirement had this ability."

"A pity, if you ask me," he muttered in return, picking up a small vial of Dragon's Blood. Snape would know that some of his ingredients had gone missing, but Harry didn't really care. After the man's treatment of him last year, particularly his role in Sirius's death, Harry didn't feel the least bit bad about borrowing the ingredients. If Snape had been a nicer person, he might have left some gold

behind to compensate, but instead he just slammed the door and watched it disappear. "Right, well, I think we've got everything now."

Ginny had placed the items down on the table, along with Harry's standard potions kit for the sixth year. She bent over the book. "Almost. We're missing a phoenix feather. Where are we going to get one of those? I doubt Snape has them in his stores."

Almost as soon as the words had left her mouth, the air beside them exploded. Ginny yelled and went for her wand as Harry jumped. He was stunned to see that the intruder was none other than Fawkes the phoenix. His mouth literally hung open as Fawkes voiced an inquisitive chirp and looked around the room calmly, seemingly totally okay with having been summoned without warning. The phoenix glided smoothly through the air and landed on the table beside the book. Both of them watched in shocked silence as Fawkes leaned over the page and cocked his head. If Harry hadn't known better, he would have sworn that Fawkes was actually reading the page. But that was impossible... right?

"Ginny," he said, sounding slightly strangled. "Phoenixes can't read, can they?"

"I dunno," Ginny answered, slowly lowering her wand and staring at Fawkes in fascination. "I wouldn't think so, but... Frankly I don't think anyone has ever gotten close enough to be able to tell."

Fawkes made a soft clucking noise in the back of his throat and glanced up, looking between the two of them. With a motion that could quite possibly have a nod of satisfaction, he hopped a bit closer to Ginny and turned. She just stared until Fawkes grew impatient and nudged her hand towards his tail feathers. Hesitantly, looking like she expected the phoenix to snap at her, she reached out and gingerly took hold of one of the feathers between her index finger and thumb. Before she had the chance to pull, Fawkes leapt into the air, leaving her holding a single phoenix feather that appeared to burn with an inner fire as it caught the light in the room.

"Right," Harry said after a long, flabbergasted pause, hoping his voice didn't sound as high as he thought it did. "Right. Well. I think the rest of the ingredients are, um, pretty normal."

Ginny just nodded and carefully set the feather down on the table with a kind of reverence that made Fawkes preen. He continued to watch over the two teens as they set about making the potion according to the instructions, which were - thankfully - also written out in clear English. Harry started slicing the materials while Ginny presided over the cauldron, adding things with careful fingers and stirring just the right amount of times. It occurred to him, once or twice, that she looked stunning when she was concentrating on something, but he forced those thoughts away again. Not once did it occur to him to wonder why Fawkes was staring at them with a look that could only be described as satisfaction.

"Okay, it needs to simmer for a bit," Ginny announced finally, adding the phoenix feather. The potion gleamed and turned a brilliant shade of white as soon as the feather hit the surface. She tapped her wand to the fire to lower the heat, then leaned back and stretched. Harry's eyes landed on her exposed midsection briefly before darting away. "Maybe we should look at the book again to make sure we've got this right."

Both of them turned to the book, and neither one noticed Fawkes hovering over the cauldron. The phoenix landed on the rim, claws gently gripping the pewter surface, and tilted his head. First he leaned over and breathed on the fire, causing the flames to burn brighter and hotter. Then he bent over the potion. Slowly, two pearly tears slipped from his eyes and dropped into the potion one after the other. A brilliant shimmer passed over the surface before the potion took on more of a luminous shine as opposed to the dull shade of ivory that it had been before. Fawkes chirped softly to himself as he quickly took flight, leaving the cauldron alone before either of the two teens could notice his strange actions. He flew in a tight circle around their heads until Ginny took notice and glanced over at the cauldron. Realizing that the appearance had changed, she stood up quickly and walked over.

"How's it looking?" Harry asked.

"It hasn't been simmering for as long as the book said, but that's what the description said to watch for," she said, lifting it off of the fire.

"At least it doesn't look disgusting," Harry said. He felt better about the prospect of the spell now, and he noticed that Ginny looked a

little more cheerful, too. "Look, here's the part that you have to read. Then we have to drink the potion. Good thing I'm the Head of the family, or I don't think this would work."

He held the book out again and both of them read the spell silently, memorizing their parts. It wasn't very complicated or long, but every word had a great deal of meaning and would need to be absolutely perfect. Once she thought that she had it down, Ginny poured exactly one goblet full of potion for both of them and handed Harry his portion. He took it with a hand that shook slightly, realizing that in a matter of minutes, he'd have an actual member of his family. Something he had been dreaming about since he was small. What would that be like? Having someone who would stick by through anything? Thoughtfully, he glanced at Ginny. It occurred to him that he already had that in both Hermione and Ginny, and this spell was merely a way of reaffirming it. The thought made him feel warm from the inside out as he raised his wand and started to speak.

The spell was surprisingly simple, and the unfamiliar words flowed from his lips easily, asking their combined magic to accept Ginny as a part of the Potter and Black families, to make them one, because it was what both of them wanted. Ginny smiled at him before she began to recite her own part in the spell, accepting the offer, reiterating the plea to become one, and adding her own, personal plea to the magic to accept her presence. Their wand tips touched, activating the spell, as both of them lifted the glasses to their lips at the same time and drank. For once, the taste was not entirely unpleasant - like honey, with a hint of something just a bit more bitter. When his glass was empty, he lowered it and blinked at Ginny. Nothing had happened, and he didn't feel any different. Had the spell gone wrong? Had they missed an ingredient in the potion?

"Maybe - " Ginny got no further. Her eyes glazed over. Harry felt a rush of dizziness and the world started to spin. The two of them slumped silently to the ground.

NIR

Hermione Granger was feeling pretty pleased with herself. She cradled what looked like a moderately sized bubble in her hands, and within the bubble were about a hundred little specs of differently coloured light. Her spell had gone perfectly, and she felt a little silly for not having thought of it earlier. Although she'd always known that

magical signatures worked something like DNA - every single one was unique to specific person, but families did tend to have common threads that linked magical signatures together - it had never occurred to her that she might be able to use them to track down Worrac.

Every time a witch or wizard cast any kind of magic, they left small bits of their magical signature behind. There were protective measures that could be taken against that, of course, but she was hoping that Worrac would have been too concerned about fitting in with a castle full of teenagers to risk using them. The spell she'd found in the book from the Room of Requirement had enabled her to collect every 'fresh' magical signature from the Great Hall. Since magical signatures could and did linger for up to a month, she'd been able to get the ones from their class, where Worrac had been casting, and since magic wasn't often cast in the Great Hall, she only had about a hundred or samples to sort through.

"Now all I have to do is create that potion," she muttered to herself. That might be a problem. The ingredients were rare and costly, and she wondered if Tonks might be able to help with that aspect if Hermione agreed to do the actual brewing. Either way, she'd soon know whether Worrac had been a Carrow or not. She was expecting at least two Carrow signatures to show up - Flora and Hestia - but if three did, then she'd be ahead of the game. On the other hand, if only two appeared, she'd be back to square one in figuring out who Worrac really was.

Hoping that wouldn't be the case, she paced the required amount of times in front of the wall and waited for the door to show up. When it did, she pushed inside and froze, horrified at the sight of Harry and Ginny sprawled on the floor, unconscious. "Oh my god!" Carefully, she set her bubble on the nearest chair and ran over to the two of them. "What happened? Harry, can you hear me?" She knelt beside him and quickly checked for a pulse. It fluttered beneath her fingertips and she breathed a quick sigh of relief at finding Ginny's to be the same. At least they weren't dead, but what the hell had happened to them?

Sitting back on her heels, Hermione looked around, taking in the cauldron and the little bit of potion that remained in the bottom, the shattered glasses, and the book, which was still open on the table. She stood up and looked at the page, her eyes widening as she took

the spell in. "So that's what Harry had been up to lately! Oh Harry," she whispered to herself, turning to look back at her two friends. Obviously something had gone wrong, but what? Considering what the spell did, it was not complicated, and both spell and potion were definitely within the abilities of a fifth or sixth year Hogwarts student.

"I have to get help," she muttered. "Dobby!"

The house elf popped in seconds later. "What can Dobby do?"

"Fetch Madame Pomfrey. No, wait, tell her I'm coming to the Hospital Wing," Hermione said, changing her mind at the last instant. Most of the professors knew about the Room of Requirement, but she didn't want to invite more trouble. Harry had clearly been trying to keep things a secret if he hadn't even told her. She tried not to feel hurt about that as she added, "And don't tell her that we were in the Room of Requirement, okay?"

Dobby nodded furiously and vanished. Before she did anything else, Hermione picked up the cauldron and placed a stasis spell on the potion inside to keep it from spoiling. She'd need what remained in order to figure out what was wrong. It was one more thing on her plate that she really didn't need the added stress of, but she didn't feel right in handing the matter over to Snape unless she absolutely had to. Though she didn't like to admit it, Harry's increasing mistrust of the adults at Hogwarts was starting to spread, and she couldn't look at Dumbledore without wondering why the man had been acting so strangely. No, she would try to investigate the potion herself, and only go to the professors if she absolutely had to.

With grim determination, she ignored her increasing fatigue and pulled her wand out so that she could levitate Harry and Ginny. Back when she had created this room for the three of them, she had purposely asked the Room to make it a place that no one except for the three of them would be able to find, so she wasn't overly concerned about someone stumbling in on the evidence before she had a chance to investigate. She closed the door behind her and started hurrying towards the Hospital Wing, the unconscious bodies of her two best friends in the world floating silently behind her.

Please review!

A/N: Thanks for the reviews, guys. I'm happy to say that everyone seemed to understand where the story is headed and I didn't hear any complaints about it - always a good thing. Now I've had a couple of requests for some action. Be careful what you wish for, yeah? The Christmas holidays will be coming up in the next handful of chapters (yep, there may be a bit of a time skip) and if what I'm planning goes well, it'll be interesting. Enjoy!

Hermione's head hurt. She sat at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall and bent over her food, wearily lifting one spoonful of mashed potatoes to her mouth after another. The students around her were still buzzing with the news of Harry and Ginny, who were both in the Hospital Wing. It had been a solid two weeks since Hermione had rushed them into Madame Pomfrey's care, and neither of them had woken up since. They'd even missed the Halloween feast, which had taken place the night after she found them. Hermione barely remembered it. Every time she visited her friends and sat beside their silent bodies, she felt torn between feeling worried and frustrated. Part of her was very tempted to shake the both of them until they had no choice but to wake up and feel her wrath for being so completely, utterly stupid.

"Idiots," she whispered to herself, unconsciously tightening her grip on her spoon until her fingers ached. She still hadn't told anyone what Harry and Ginny had been up to. Professor McGonagall had questioned her endlessly, and all Hermione had told her was that she'd come across the two of them already unconscious on the fifth floor, with nothing around their bodies to indicate what might have happened. It had pained her to lie to her favourite professor, particularly because she felt that Professor McGonagall was trustworthy, but it couldn't be helped. Fortunately, the headmaster had not seen fit to ask her himself, as she would have little protection from his Occlumency. Why he hadn't asked her, she didn't dare think about too closely.

The Hogwarts rumour mill was going crazy. Stories ranging from close to the truth (a spell or potion incident gone wrong) to crazy (Harry had succumbed to the dark and, when Ginny refused to join him, attempted to kill her) to downright bizarre (Harry and Ginny were involved in a suicide pact that neither one had been able to go through with) to frightening (Death Eaters had broken into Hogwarts and attacked the Boy-Who-Lived and his lover – that one had several first years in tears). No one had come close to actually

figuring it out, which was both a blessing and a curse as far as she was concerned.

Phoenix tears. Just thinking about that one extra ingredient in the potion made Hermione lose her appetite. Her first step towards figuring things out had been learning the spell that Professor Snape sometimes cast when a student had done a potion poorly. It gave a list of everything that had been added to the potion; more difficult and comprehensive versions could list the quantity of ingredients and the order in which they'd been added, or give exact detail about what had happened during the brewing. Hermione hadn't tried to learn the harder versions once she'd found out about the phoenix tears. There was no doubt in her mind that they were the root of everything that had gone wrong.

Potions was an exacting science. The slightest little thing could change a potion completely. Who knew what kind of potion Harry and Ginny had actually ingested? The only thing that had kept her from running to Dumbledore was that the two of them couldn't be poisoned, because phoenix tears would have counteracted any damage being done to their bodies. They were physically fine... they just wouldn't – or couldn't – wake up. Hermione sighed and rubbed her head, wishing that she had someone she trusted to talk this whole disaster through with. She was not prepared for the letter that was dropped on her head right as that thought was going through her mind, and she was so distracted that it took her a moment to register the envelope. By that point, it had sunk into her glass of pumpkin juice, and she had to fish it out and mutter a drying spell.

"Granger," she read silently, her eyes darting over the line. "Astronomy Tower, tonight, at eleven. Be there."

That was it. No signature, no identifying details, no nothing. Hermione flipped the parchment over, but saw nothing that would give her any hint as to who the writer – or writers – could be. What, she was just supposed to go up to the Astronomy Tower by herself? Blindly trusting that whoever was waiting wouldn't kill her? She might have been a Gryffindor, but she wasn't stupid. She probably would have disregarded the parchment entirely were it not for the fact that she glanced up at that moment and found herself staring at the Slytherin table, and in particular, Draco. Draco met her eyes squarely and then deliberately dropped his gaze to the parchment before darting back up to her face. He raised an eyebrow, as though

to say 'get it?' and she suddenly felt her interest in the midnight meeting skyrocket. One quick nod later, and both of them turned away like the brief exchange had never happened.

"Hermione, here you are." The clattering of a dish landing beside her made her jump. Ron's arm came around her shoulders as he dropped down into the seat at her side. "Are you alright?"

"What?" she asked in surprise, amazed that he'd approached her. They hadn't really spoken during the past two weeks, and once or twice, she'd seen him sitting awfully close to Lavender Brown in the Common Room. It had hurt, that Ron had apparently moved on (or was close to it, if the way Lavender sometimes eyed him was any indication) but she hadn't confronted him yet.

"You look tired," Ron said, frowning. "Your face is pale, and you haven't been eating properly. Is this about – " his face twisted into a slight grimace – "Harry and Ginny?"

"Partly," Hermione admitted. It was as good an excuse as anything. "I'm really worried about them, Ron. It's been two weeks and no one is any closer to figuring out how to wake them up."

"I'm sure they'll be fine. Potter always come out on his feet, doesn't he?" He turned away slightly and stabbed a roasted potato with his fork. "I heard that you were the one who found them. That must have been upsetting."

The memory was almost enough to make her cry. "Yeah, I was. They were so... so quiet and still."

Ron sighed. "Can I help?"

"You'd want to?" She couldn't help the look of shock that spread across her face. Guilt made her squirm when Ron scowled, offended by her surprise.

"I don't like either of them anymore, but I know they're still important to you, Hermione. If I can help, then I would do it for you," he replied.

His honesty and sweetness touched her, and she felt even worse for having ignored him for so long. "Oh, Ron, you're an angel to ask, but this is something I have to take care of on my own," Hermione

replied. She felt horrible for having turned him down when his arm dropped away from her shoulders; she could tell that he felt that she was hiding things from him, and it wasn't as though she could deny it because that was actually true. "Please, don't be angry."

"I'm not angry, Hermione, I'm... frustrated," Ron answered honestly. "I feel like you and I have drifted apart in spite of my best efforts to remain close to you. I still wanted you to be my girlfriend, but... I get the feeling that you don't want me to be your boyfriend."

Hermione licked her lips. Oh Merlin, she was not prepared for this to happen. "Ron, I..."

"Just save it, alright? I guess I always figured that you would choose Harry in the end, but I honestly thought you would have a little more sense than that." The comment wasn't made with any amount of anger, just unhappiness and wistfulness for what could have been.

"I'm not choosing Harry," she said, wishing that there was some way to make him understand. If she could only find an answer for everything that had happened! But she was gradually beginning to realize that, even if there was some way to get rid of the brain's impact on Ron, things would never go back to the way they had been before. Ron and Harry would never be friends, and Ginny would never be a Weasley. She'd always be caught between the two of them. "Ron, please. I know you don't believe me when I say that there's something wrong with you, but the brain from the Department of Mysteries –"

"This again?" His expression switched immediately to annoyance, and he sighed, rising to his feet and attracting the attention of a few other students. "Hermione, please, would you just let it go already? I know it's difficult for you to understand that I don't like Potter anymore. I can see something wrong with him that no one else seems to be able to see. But there is nothing wrong with me. And as far as I'm concerned, as long as you continue to believe that there is, we can't be anything but classmates."

"Ron, wait!" Hermione cried. It hurt more than she'd expected to watch him walk away; Ron had been one of her best friends, and she'd often entertained dreams of the two of them getting married. He didn't stop, though; he continued on down to the other end of the table and sat beside Seamus and Dean, and he didn't look at her

again. Unable to hold back the tears any longer, Hermione stood up, grabbed her bag, and left the Great Hall in a hurry. She wanted to believe that someday the two of them would be friends again, but that hope grew more flimsy every day, and she was almost certain that it had just been snapped entirely.

NIR

Chance Astrum sat beside the still body of his godson and looked the boy over with a worried, critical eye. Harry's face was pale, and dark circles lined the flesh beneath his eyes, even though he'd been sleeping for the past two weeks. Occasionally, he was prone to fits of nightmares, and he would thrash about frantically as moans and half-formed names fell from his lips. It hurt him to hear Harry call out his name and know that his godson didn't realize that he was close. He would have gladly given up his magic at that moment to be able to tell Harry the truth, but unfortunately, no amount of spells or potions seemed to be enough to get the boy to come back to consciousness. Madame Pomfrey was at her wits end, and she was seriously considering petitioning the Headmaster to have both Harry and Ginny moved to St. Mungos. The only reason they hadn't been moved there already was the concern that the Ministry might try to interfere with their care once the two teens were outside of Hogwarts,

"C'mon, Harry, you can pull through this. Whoever did this to you, you can beat him," Chance muttered, holding Harry's limp hand against his cheek. Pomfrey had given him a few strange looks the first few times she'd caught him at Harry's side, but she seemed willing to delay asking questions when she spotted the look of utter torment in his eyes. He left only to teach his classes and attend the defence club meetings, but even those had lost their appeal. The whole point behind them had been spending more time with Ginny so she would find out the truth, and there was no point in hoping Hermione would do it instead, not when Hermione had too much on her shoulders already. Realistically, he knew it was still important to teach the other students, but that was the furthest thing from his mind when his godson was lying unconscious in a hospital bed.

"I'm sure he'll be alright, Padfoot," Remus said quietly, placing a hand on Chance's shoulder. He was staying at the castle now, living with Chance in the professor's rooms he'd been given by Dumbledore. Few of the students even realized that he was there,

as he made a conscious effort to avoid being seen. "We should go before someone comes in."

"I can't leave him yet. I keep thinking that there's something I'm missing," he remarked with a sigh, squeezing his godson's hand tightly. He hoped that Harry would squeeze back, but there was no reaction. "I just don't get it, Remus. Harry is an excellent duelist, and so is Ginny. No one should have been able to get the jump on these two. Madame Pomfrey said she detected a foreign potion in both of them, and they're way too smart to ingest just anything. Something about this whole situation doesn't feel right."

Remus sighed, looking equally frustrated. "I don't know. Even intelligent people can be taken in. You and I both know that first hand."

"I guess." Reluctantly, he placed Harry's hand back on the bed and smoothed his godson's hair back. In the other bed just beside Harry, Ginny stirred briefly and released a contented sigh. Chance held his breath, looking at her hopefully, and was crushed when she merely settled back down into a steady sleep. Still, it was something at least, and more of a reaction than any of them had seen since the two teens had been brought into the Hospital Wing.

"Odd," said Remus suddenly.

"What's odd, Rem?" Chance rubbed a hand over his face, feeling totally drained when he thought about his next class, which were the fourth year Slytherins and Gryffindors. Fantastic.

"It's just – did you notice that when you were touching Harry, Ginny was the one who reacted?" Glancing back and forth between the boy and girl, Remus frowned. It was something simple that he normally would have ignored, but that sort of thing had happened more than once during the past couple of days while he'd been around. There had been a niggling suspicion growing in the back of his mind as it got closer to the next full moon; his senses were growing stronger and it allowed him to notice things that he might otherwise miss, like scents that were getting more similar. "Sirius, help me for a moment, would you? I want to put the two of them into the same bed."

Chance arched an eyebrow and gave his mate a strange look. "You want to put them in the same bed? Remmy, are you feeling alright? I know Poppy has a thing for you, but that won't stop her from strangling you with her bare hands."

A flush spread across the bridge of Remus's cheeks. "Cease calling me that immediately," he ordered, glaring at his sniggering partner. "I bloody well hate that name and you know it. And for your information, Poppy does not have a "thing" for me. We were colleagues and she cared for me when I was younger after the full moon. Just because we have a slightly closer relationship than the normal student and Healer does not mean that - "

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry," Chance said, chuckling softly. "If you promise to protect me if she catches us, I'll help you."

Remus just snorted in reply and stood back as Chance walked over to Ginny. He pushed the covers back, revealing the blue cotton pyjamas that Hermione had brought to the Hospital Wing for her to wear, and slipped his arms underneath her body. It was a lot easier to lift her than it had been during their nightly talks in the summer, when Ginny used to fall asleep at the table and he would carry her to bed afterwards. Remus pulled Harry's covers back and helped Chance to slide the girl in beside his godson. Immediately, Harry's hands reached out unconsciously for Ginny as she curled up against his chest. Chance watched the two of them, feeling breathless with hope. That was the most movement he'd seen from either one.

"What d'you think it means?" he asked quietly, the teasing edge having fallen from his voice. Something was going on, that much was obvious, but he wasn't quite sure where Remus was headed with this.

"If I'm right, it means that your godson has been messing around with dangerous, complex magic," Remus said wryly. "So basically, he's been acting just like his godfather."

"Oi!" A wounded look came over Chance's face. "When did I ever...?"

"I'm sorry, I believed I was talking to the man who became an illegal Animagus at the age of fifteen," he replied, eyes wide with mock surprise. "Have I mistaken you for someone else?"

"Err..."

"That's what I thought." Shaking his head, Remus looked back at the two of them. "I'm going to go talk to Hermione. I think she knows more about what's going on than she's admitted, and she may be more willing to share with someone she trusts. You stay here and guard those two. Try to keep Pomfrey from separating them. The contact seems to have done them good."

"Alright," Chance said, nodding. He sat down in his chair with a determined expression, and, glancing at him, Remus decided that he had better stop by the headmaster's office first to let the man know that someone else would need to teach the fourth year D.A.D.A. class. From the looks of it, Chance wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, not until Harry and Ginny woke up. Hiding his grin – it felt like, for the first time, Sirius was actually back – he headed out of the room.

Left to entertain himself, Chance leaned forward and looked down at the two students. Harry was his godson and he loved him, but he cared a great deal for Ginny as well. She had been the only one willing to listen to his stories about the Marauders, and even after she had returned to Hogwarts last year, she had responded to his often long, rambling letters with interested missives that posed thoughtful questions. Oddly enough, by allowing him to live in the past, she had grounded him to the present and kept him from going completely stir crazy when Dumbledore had insisted that he remain locked up in Grimmauld Place. He owed her a lot, and he didn't see any way of ever making it up to her.

"Somehow, I will," he promised. "I'll make it up to both of you, I promise." As he spoke, he noticed that Ginny was stirring. Chance leapt to his feet and leaned over her, watching her face intently. Her eyes fluttered open, and she gazed up at him blankly, with no sign of any recognition. "Ginny? Ginny, can you hear me? Do you know who I am?"

"I can hear you," she said slowly, looking like she was having a difficult time stringing words together. "You're..."

"I'm your professor," he told her when she trailed off. "Professor Astrum. Remember?"

Her eyebrows came together, and she squinted up at him. "Professor... No... That's not right."

Chance frowned, worried at her behaviour. Was there something seriously wrong with her? More so than any of them had realized? Cold fear began to creep up on him. "Yes, it is. It's me."

"I know. It's you," she echoed, a tiny smile curving her lips. "Sirius..."

Fear gave way to shock as her eyes fell closed. She was out instantly, giving him no time to question her further, and even when he shook her frantically by the shoulder, she failed to respond. Chance was left standing over the two of them, his heart pounding. Had Ginny really said his name, or had he simply imagined it? If she had, did she know the truth, or had she been half asleep, dreaming, and only thought that she'd seen Sirius Black in place of Chance Astrum? The fact that he didn't know was unbearable, but there was no way for him to find out. All he could do was sit helplessly beside them and wait.

NIR

It was late, nearly eleven, by the time that Hermione Granger managed to extricate herself from the clutches of Lavender and Parvati and sneak out of the Common Room. She wasn't scheduled to patrol the castle that night, so technically, she wasn't supposed to be outside of her dorm, but five years as Harry Potter's best friend had given her new appreciation for the occasional breaking of the rules. As a prefect, she knew the castle almost as well as the twins had. The only thing that really concerned her as she hurried through the halls was the fact that the students who had sent the note - if it really was Malfoy - might have left already. Lavender and Parvati had stayed up for hours talking about Ron, and it was only a sneaky sleeping spell shot from underneath the covers that allowed Hermione to finally leave.

"Please still be there," she whispered to herself, panting a little as she scurried up yet another flight of stairs. She was completely unprepared for the body that she crashed into at the top, and the resulting collision nearly sent her falling backwards. At the last second, hands gripped her shoulders and yanked her to safety.

Once she'd regained her balance, Hermione looked up into amber eyes. "Professor Lupin?"

"Hello, Hermione," Remus greeted. He'd been waiting to track her down for some time, ever since he'd gotten detained at the Headmaster's office and tricked into using Polyjuice Potion to teach the classes in place of Charlie, but he hadn't wanted to risk going into Gryffindor Tower to find her. "I've been looking for you."

"What are you doing here?" Hermione stepped back until there was a proper distance between them and looked at him curiously.

"Harry didn't you tell you?" He raised an eyebrow at that fact.

Hermione bit her lip, a little put out at the fact that there was even more going on that she hadn't known about than she'd realized. By now, though, she could no longer put all of the blame Harry alone for that fact. She was starting to realize just how wrapped up in her desperate search for a cure for Ron that she had been. "I've been really busy these past few weeks," she offered by way of explanation. "And Harry's been spending a lot of time with Ginny."

Remus nodded. "I know. That's actually what I came to speak with you about. I know they're both in the Hospital Wing."

"Is that why Professor Dumbledore called you?" She sighed and tucked a stray curl behind her ear. "Remus, I'm pretty sure that they'll both be fine. I know it's been two weeks, but they'll wake up soon, hopefully. There was no need for you to come all the way here."

The man hesitated slightly. "I wanted to be here just in case," he said at last, looking her square in the eyes. "Hermione, tell me the truth. Do you know what's going on with them? If you know, please tell me. Harry is like my own cub. I'd do anything to help him." His eyes were filled with pleading.

It was Hermione's turn to hesitate. Remus was different from the other adults in the castle. No matter how angry Harry was with him for ignoring him during the summer, she truly believed that Remus had her friend's best interests at heart, but at the same time, Remus was extremely loyal to Dumbledore for the chances that the Headmaster had granted to him in his youth. Could he be trusted?

What choice did she have? She had reached a dead end on her own, and the alternative was seeking help from Dumbledore or Snape.

"Remus, there are things going on that we can't exactly share Professor Dumbledore," she said slowly, casting a quick glance around for any paintings that might have been eavesdropping. Fortunately, Remus had stopped her in a hall where there were none. "If I told you... I mean, I do want your help, but you'd have to promise..."

"To keep him out of it?" he asked. "I can do that."

"You can?" Hermione blinked at him, startled by his easy agreement. "I thought..."

"You thought I was completely loyal to Dumbledore? I thought I was, too." Remus smiled bitterly. Those feelings had pretty much disappeared once he discovered that Sirius had been alive for so long and Dumbledore had forced the man to keep himself under wraps. The wolf could have easily killed Remus if he hadn't held on for so long from sheer determination. Both he and Harry had been suffering needlessly for months because of Dumbledore's manipulations. He no longer believed the headmaster was interested in doing anything except winning the war with Voldemort no matter what it took. Glancing down at Hermione, he nodded firmly. "You can tell me, Hermione. I swear that I won't tell Dumbledore. I'll swear on my magic if you want me to."

"No, that's alright. I trust you." It felt good to say that. There were so few people that she could trust. Hermione stepped closer and reached into her robes, pulling out a vial of a milky-looking liquid. "You know that Ginny disinherited herself from the Weasley family for Harry, right?" At his nod, she continued, "Well, Harry wanted to do something for her in return. He decided to make her a part of his family."

Remus's eyes widened. "He did?"

She nodded. "I believe they were searching for a ritual or spell that was capable of doing so, and they must have found one. I found the two of them in the Room of Requirement, unconscious, with a book open to a very specific ritual. A cauldron was nearby with this potion

in it." Hermione held up the vial. "The Room of Requirement gave me the spell necessary to analyze it on a basic level. I know that there were extra ingredients put in that weren't supposed to be there. But I don't know what to do with that information." To her horror, her voice quivered a little as she finished speaking.

"The pressure's probably not helping," he said gently, watching her with sympathetic eyes. "I know the spells you're talking about, Hermione. Why don't you give me the vial and let me help you look into it? I've cast the more in-depth analyzation spells before. They may give us more insight."

Her fingers closed around the vial protectively. "I..." Hermione trailed off. She knew that Remus was just trying to help, but this was her only way of finding out what had happened. If it disappeared, or if Remus couldn't be trusted after all, Harry and Ginny might never wake up. Remus said nothing and waited patiently, his hand extended, allowing her to make up her mind. Finally, Hermione summoned her courage, reached out, and placed it in his hand. "Please be careful."

"I will, I promise. Listen, why don't you come to the Hospital Wing tomorrow morning and we can look at it together?" he suggested. "Bring that book with you. I'll write you an excuse for your classes."

"Alright. I have to go, Remus. I'll see you then." Tucking her wand back into her robes, Hermione walked past him. She had missed more classes in her sixth year than in all of the other years combined, but with everything that had been going on, she was finding it hard to care, and if it meant finding out what was going on with Harry and Ginny, it was worth it.

It didn't take her long to walk the rest of the way to the Astronomy Tower. Draco was sitting on one of the windowsills waiting for her, but she was surprised to see the young girl sitting next to him. Hermione struggled to place her as she pushed the door closed and walked across the room. Only when the girl turned around, revealing deep violet eyes framed by long, dark brown hair, did she recognize her. Astoria Greengrass. She glanced between the two of them curiously, wondering what Astoria was doing with Draco in the middle of the night. Was there something going on between them? The resulting flash of jealousy that lit through her at the thought was not appreciated, and she tried hard to ignore it.

"Hullo," she said lamely.

"You're late, Granger," Draco said without glancing back at her.

"I had to curse my dorm mates before I could slip out," Hermione replied, not sorry in the least. "What did you send me that note for, anyway?"

"He didn't. I did," said Astoria, curling one of her legs underneath her. "I didn't think you would meet me unless you knew Draco was coming as well. I was... I wanted... Ginny. Is she... alright?"

Hermione blinked at her, surprised. "What does it matter to you?"

Astoria frowned. No, it was more of a pout. "It doesn't."

Understanding hit Hermione so hard that she rocked backwards on her heels. "You're friends," she breathed. A lot of Ginny's odd behaviour over the past few years made sense. Mysterious letters that she refused to share. The Slytherin students she occasionally spoke to in the hallways. Times when she had gone off to visit people, but avoided mentioning who she was visiting. She watched Astoria's cheeks turn a light pink color and knew that she was correct.

"We're acquaintances. Snape partners us up in Potions class sometimes. It's not like I care or anything," she said quickly. "I was just wondering how she was doing, that's all."

"Ginny will be fine," Hermione told her, warming slightly towards the younger girl at the obvious look of relief on Astoria's face. "She hasn't woken up yet, but Remus and I are going to be working on figuring out what happened."

"So the werewolf is back in the castle, is he?" Draco drawled, finally twisting around.

"Yes, he's back, and Remus is more than just a werewolf," she sighed. "He's a good man, Draco." The sound of his given name still sounded odd on her lips, but the magic invoked by Lucius's disowning would not allow anyone to refer to him by 'Malfoy' any

longer. "You'd know that if you stopped being so concerned with your damned pureblood prejudice."

Draco just snorted.

"Was that the only reason you called me up here?" Hermione asked tiredly, her gaze focusing more on Astoria than Draco.

"Yes," said Draco.

"No," Astoria corrected, jabbing him in the side with a well-placed elbow. "Granger, I'm sure you've researched what happened to Ginny and Potter. Research faster. You have to wake them up and soon."

Hermione's eyes narrowed slightly. "Why?"

Astoria looked uncomfortable. "Does it matter?"

Folding her arms, Hermione frowned. "I have a bunch of other things on the go at the same time," she said dismissively. It wasn't exactly a lie if she was only making it sound like something else might be more important, right? "Unless you can give me a good reason, at least I know that Harry and Ginny can't be touched by Dumbledore or Voldemort like this."

Draco looked up at her sharply, but it was Astoria who spoke. "Have you ever heard of partner magic?"

"Partner magic?" The slightly unfamiliar term forced her to stop and think for a few moments. Gradually, she remembered reading a little bit about it in one of her Ancient Runes texts. "Isn't that where two wizards join their magic together? It's illegal."

"It's not illegal. It's just... frowned upon," said Astoria hastily.

The pieces came together, slotting perfectly into place, and Hermione felt like hitting her head against the wall. "You and Ginny?" she guessed wearily.

Slowly, Astoria nodded. "We found out about it in our second year," she said haltingly. "Ginny saw it as a way to guard against another possession attempt. We've been... training our magic together for

the past four years. I've always been able to feel her, even when we're not actually connected. I could tell where she was and something of what she was feeling." Her words came in a jumbled rush. "But now I can't. Ever since she and Harry did whatever they did, the place where she used to be is a total blank. And I snuck into the Hospital Wing last night to see her, and my magic didn't recognize hers at all. She's changed. There was no place for me anymore." She stopped abruptly and bit her lip, like she was afraid she had said too much.

The words were slow to process, but once they had, Hermione felt herself pale. Partner magic, once it was built up between two people - particularly for as long as Astoria and Ginny had apparently been at it - was supposed to last forever. Nothing should have been able to destroy that kind of bond... and yet, something had. Her mind whirled, struggling to figure out what could have possibly gone so wrong with the spell that Harry and Ginny had been casting. Bringing Ginny into the Potter/Black family shouldn't have disrupted her ties to Astoria. She'd known that something had gone seriously wrong, but this just brought the matter home.

"I'll find out," she said breathlessly. "I promise you, Astoria. I'll find out."

"Thank you," Astoria mumbled, folding her hands in her lap. "Will you let me know what you find out?"

"I will," Hermione promised. Astoria looked unbearably young at that moment. Both she and Draco did. It hurt to see. She had to look away. "I have Remus to help. Werewolf or not, I know that he can be trusted. Don't worry. Between the two of us, we'll be able to wake Harry and Ginny up. And soon." Her voice rang out with authority, hiding what she was truly feeling. Fear.

Please review!

A/N: Thanks for the reviews, everyone. Quite a few people were curious about what happened between Harry and Ginny... wonder no more. A lot of questions will be answered in this chapter. I hope that the end is clear, but as always, if it's not just leave me a (logged in) review and I'll try to answer any questions you might have. Enjoy!

Note: I apologize for anyone who got more than one alert for this chapter. I think everyone has a love/hate relationship with this site and lately it's been more hate than love, at least for me.

To say that Severus Snape was not pleased when he received an early morning summons from the headmaster was an understatement. Reluctantly, he pulled himself away from his latest invention and placed a stasis charm so that it wouldn't be ruined in his absence. There was no point in continuing; he knew from previous experience that if he ignored the call, Dumbledore would show up on his doorstep, and that was the last thing he wanted. Once the headmaster was inside his chambers, he wouldn't leave for hours, not until Severus had his first class. That was not how he wanted to spend the rest of his morning.

Wearing a sour look that sent more than one student hurrying out of his way, he swept through the halls and up to the Headmaster's office, where the guardian leapt aside for him after a muttered "Lemon drops". Surprisingly, he was not greeted with a jovial smile and greeting as he entered the room, which immediately set his inner alarm off, though his face remained calm and composed. A pensive Dumbledore was never a good thing. It was with a fair amount of trepidation that he took his normal seat in front of the Headmaster's desk and waved off the absent offer of a lemon drop.

"You've not heard anything from Voldemort lately, have you?" Dumbledore asked, setting the tin back down on the desk.

"No. He hasn't called a meeting in some time," Severus admitted uneasily. The Dark Lord had never been silent for so long, and he was starting to get worried. His only saving grace was that other Death Eaters hadn't heard from him either, meaning that Severus's delicate position as spy probably hadn't been discovered. On the other hand, it likely meant that Voldemort was planning something truly heinous. He wasn't sure which would be worse.

Dumbledore nodded slowly, looking preoccupied, and moved on to the real reason for the meeting. "I've just been to visit young Mr Potter and Ginevra in the Hospital Wing," he said.

Severus fought the urge to roll his eyes. Unlike the others professors, who all seemed to think that the two children had been the targets of an unfortunate attack, he strongly suspected that whatever had afflicted Potter and Ginevra had been done by their own hands. Several ingredients had gone missing from his potions cabinet, and the theft had Potter written all over it. He had done some research into their affliction at Dumbledore's request, but with no actual potion to analyze, there wasn't much that Severus could do. The traditional methods of awakening them hadn't worked, and as far as Madame Pomfrey could tell, they were merely sleeping, which wasn't necessarily cause for alarm in his opinion. Any vacation from Potter's obnoxiousness was alright with him.

"I suppose they've finally awakened, then?" he asked, already dreading the next sixth year Potions class. How that boy had gotten an O for his OWLs, he'd never know.

"Not yet, actually, though there are signs that they are close to it," answered the headmaster. He tapped his fingers together, frowning. "Truth be told, Severus, I was somewhat pleased by Ronald Weasley's brash actions this year. I made the decision some time ago that it wouldn't be good for Harry to be too attached to anyone. The death of Sirius Black nearly killed Harry as well. I wanted him to become more secluded. It's good for him to have friends that he is willing fight for, but no one close enough that he would not be willing to give up his life to defeat the Dark Lord if necessary. I'm afraid Ginevra has made that infinitely more difficult."

"Why's that?" Severus muttered, making an effort to hide the queasiness that Dumbledore's words had invoked. The old man could pretend all he liked that he cared about Harry, but sometimes it seemed like his true intent was to end the war and sacrifices like Potter and Severus himself be damned.

"I believe they have formed a soul bond."

Those eight simple words changed everything. Suddenly Potter, whom Severus had never seen as more than an annoying child who would have a better chance of being adopted by Severus than of

beating Voldemort, actually looked like he had a decent chance at winning the war. He shifted his weight slightly. "They're soul mates," he guessed.

"Yes." Dumbledore sighed. "You see my dilemma. I believe Harry may need to die to fully defeat Voldemort, but he will never agree to die if he has bonded with Ginevra."

"You can't break the bond," Severus said immediately, hoping against hope that Dumbledore wouldn't even conceive of such cruelty. Even if it could be done, Severus knew that he would do everything in his power to stop him. He didn't like the Potter boy, but he would never allow that to happen to Lily's child.

"I will do what is necessary, Severus." There was a cold glint in those pale blue eyes that Severus had never seen before. "I will not let Voldemort win this war."

"Potter will be stronger this way," Severus pointed out. Much as he hated to extol the virtues of any Gryffindor... "Ginevra is an exceptionally strong young witch as it is. Bonded together, even the Dark Lord would have difficulty defeating the two of them."

Dumbledore merely nodded and settled back in his chair. "In any case, I would like you to help me watch them, Severus. Keep an eye out for anything strange or unusual. There are different levels of bonding, even between soul mates, and I need to know what level they have reached."

"Very well," he murmured. Realizing that their meeting was over, he stood up and nodded to Fawkes when the phoenix let loose with an approving trill. Silently, he turned and swept from the office, his mind spinning. He would do as the headmaster had asked, but that didn't mean he would report everything he learned back to the man. Severus was used to telling one of his masters only what the man wanted to hear. It would be no different if he were to do the same thing with the other, as long as it was in the name of Lily and protecting the only living link to her that mattered.

NIR

The next morning after a sleepless night, Hermione joined Remus in the Hospital Wing bright and early, not even bothering to bring her

class books along. She wasn't leaving until they had figured out what the problem was. To her surprise, Chance Astrum was seated beside the bed, but although he smiled and nodded in her direction, she didn't even notice. Her eyes had gone straight to the sight of Harry and Ginny curled up in the same bed together. Harry was lying on his side with his right arm draped over Ginny's hip. Ginny was on her side as well, with her right hand clutching Harry's pyjama top. Their left hands were intertwined and draped across the pillow in between their faces. It was adorable and made Hermione instantly wish she had a camera. Where was Colin Creevey when you needed him?

"Cute, isn't it?" Astrum said behind her, his eyes twinkling at her reaction. "They switched positions sometime late last night, but they haven't let go of each other since we moved them into the same bed. Poppy tried to pry them apart without success this morning. I think they're staying like that come hell or high water."

With effort, Hermione tore her eyes away and twisted to look at him. "Why did she try to separate them?" she asked, upset in spite of herself. Obviously it was breaking the rules for two students to share a bed, but Harry and Ginny looked so comfortable together. If she were only just meeting them for the first time, she would have sworn that they had some relationship beyond that of just friends. She'd never seen Harry hold onto someone as tightly as he was holding onto Ginny.

"Protocol, knowing Poppy, but then Dumbledore came in, and he just wanted to see what would happen." There was a dangerous edge to Astrum's voice that was familiar to her, but she couldn't place it. He continued, "When physical methods didn't work, he decided to try doing it by magic. I don't think he was entirely prepared for the backlash of magic that threw him against the wall."

Hermione gasped. "Harry and Ginny did that?" she said, awed and a little amused.

"It was excellent to watch," Astrum assured her, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "I don't think Dumbledore knew what hit him. He gave up after that."

"But... why would they attack Dumbledore?" Placing her bag on one of the empty beds, Hermione approached her unconscious friends

cautiously, half afraid that the same thing would happen to her. When nothing did, she paused beside the bed and reached out to gently brush a few strands of hair out of Ginny's face.

"It's a natural reaction, Hermione," Remus said as he emerged from the Hospital Wing's bathroom. "Harry and Ginny didn't do it on purpose. Their magic was trying to protect them. You should feel fortunate that you were able to get so close. Since Dumbledore tried using magic to separate them, no one except for Professor Astrum and me has been able to approach. A shield forms to stop the progress of anyone else. Harry must trust you very deeply to allow you to get so close."

"I'm his best friend," Hermione said sadly, hoping that the jealousy she was feeling wasn't evident in her face or voice. She had convinced herself that she was ready for Harry and Ginny to become a couple, but she was realizing that she wasn't as prepared as she'd thought. Behind her, Remus and Astrum exchanged compassionate glances before Remus stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Have you ever heard of a soul bond, Hermione?" he asked gently.

"A soul bond?" she echoed, searching the vast recesses of her mind for the unfamiliar term. At last, she was forced to shake her head. Her temporary bout of jealousy was swept aside in a wave of burning curiosity. "What is it?"

"Illegal, for one thing," said Astrum, leaning back in his chair. "The Ministry outlawed the practice years ago because it was seen as being too dangerous."

"It sounds right up Harry's alley, then," she said with a half-hearted smile, figuring that was why Astrum was there. "Is that what happened to Harry and Ginny? It's not going to hurt them, will it?"

"No, though it will probably cause a few problems when they first wake up. A soul bond, Hermione, is essentially exactly what it sounds like. It's when the actual souls of two people become bound together. You have heard of the concept of soul mates, correct?"

The world threatened to tilt under Hermione's feet. "Yes..."

"Originally, a soul bond could only be formed between soul mates," Remus explained. "All soul mates have a natural bond, but it can be made more powerful by ritual magic. Eventually, people grew so jealous of that bond that a process was created to ensure that it could happen between any two individuals as long as there was a pre-existing bond between them. They didn't even have to be lovers. So soul bonds could be created between siblings or even friends. However, a soul bond between soul mates has always been the strongest kind of bond. It's completely unbreakable."

Hermione put a hand to her head. "Let me get this straight. You think that Harry and Ginny are soul mates and that they've created a soul bond between them?" she asked.

Remus nodded. "I'm afraid so. Do you have that book that you mentioned finding with the two of them?"

"It's in my bag." Hermione turned away and went back to the bed. She was slower than normal at pulling it out of her bag because she was glad for the chance to be able to compose herself before she faced the two men again. A soul bond? Soul mates? It was like something out of a fairy tale, but not, because it was happening to her two best friends. Swiping a hand quickly over her eyes, she picked up the book and opened it to the correct page before handing it over to Remus.

He glanced down at the page, his lips moving silently as he read. At last, he nodded, an expression of weariness passing over his face. "Yes, it's as we expected," he said tiredly. "I recognize the spell they were trying to use. It really was designed to bring someone into a family, though it's supposed to be done under Ministry supervision. The two of them got that much right. But what they didn't know was that they were soul mates, which changed everything. Thanks to the additional ingredients added to the potion, the ritual was modified and brought their bond into full effect instead."

"Wait. Additional ingredients?" Hermione said sharply, focusing on that while her mind fought to process everything she'd just been told. "The spell I cast only found one!"

"I used the more advanced version," Remus told her. "The one that catalogues every step taken with the potion. Harry and Ginny made the potion correctly up until the point when it was left to simmer.

That's when someone - I doubt it was either of them - changed the fire to phoenix fire and then added phoenix tears to the potion. It changed the potion to something we've never seen before, and that activated a soul bond."

"Phoenix fire." She sank down onto the bed, staring up at him in a daze. Of course the spell she had cast wouldn't have picked up on that. It was designed to analyze the ingredients in the potion and nothing else. Once she'd heard about the phoenix tears, she had stopped looking for any other answers. Hermione shook her head and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "So what does this mean for Harry and Ginny?"

"That's the thing about soul bonds. They're different for everyone," Astrum said, rising to his feet. "No documented case is exactly the same. We won't know what's going to happen until those two wake up."

"And when will that be?"

The two men exchanged worried looks. "By all rights, they should have already. We don't know why they're still unconscious," Remus admitted. "It's normal for newly bonded mates to sleep while the bond forms, but it should have done so within the first twenty-four to forty-eight hours. This is unprecedented."

"So we're no closer to finding an answer." Her shoulders slumped.

"Having them in the same bed seems to have put us a step closer. Ginny actually woke up for a moment yesterday, and both of them having been showing more signs of life in the past day than they have in weeks." Remus looked at Astrum for a moment, and then focused back on Hermione. "You know as it gets closer to... that time of the month... my senses get stronger. I can smell that their scents are starting to become similar, and allowing them physical contact appears to have sped the process up."

Hermione sighed to herself and ran her fingers through her hair. "Well, do you know if Harry accomplished his goal or not?" she asked finally. She wanted to be able to do research, or concoct a potion, or do something other than just sit there and feel helpless.

Astrum's mouth twitched. "I'll say he did."

"Chance." Remus gave the other man a look that silenced him. "Hermione, perhaps I didn't make it clear enough. Soul bonds between soul mates are unbreakable. Permanent. Even if they choose not to consummate the bond." He blushed faintly and cleared his throat. "In the eyes of the wizarding world, Harry and Ginny are legally married now."

"Oh my god," Hermione muttered, overwhelmed. They'd fucked up even more than she had expected. On the one hand, it was good news. Ginny was desperately in love with Harry and always would be, and Harry was starting to fall for her, too. But on the other hand, they were just fifteen and sixteen years old, and that was young for that kind of commitment. She propped her chin on her hands and stared at them speculatively, wondering if this would be for the better, or if things would go downhill. "Who added the phoenix tears and fire to the potion? Where would you even get those kinds of ingredients?"

"We don't know that either," Remus admitted. "Both of those items are exceedingly rare. In fact, the only way you could get phoenix fire was if - " He stopped speaking suddenly as understanding dawned. Astrum appeared to be on the same wavelength, for the man nodded at Remus before he turned and strode out of the Hospital Wing. Remus looked back at Hermione and said, "Only a phoenix could conjure up phoenix fire. And as far as I know, there's only one phoenix around Hogwarts."

"Fawkes," Hermione breathed. She'd never met the phoenix before, but Harry had told her the story of his battle in the Chamber of Secrets many times. Quickly, she began trying to remember everything she had ever read about phoenixes. Many people considered them to be creatures of rebirth due to the fact that they possessed burning days. They were generally attracted to people who were starting over, both literally and metaphorically. Dumbledore was rumoured to have first been seen with Fawkes not long after the final battle with Grindlewald, when the wizarding world had been granted a new lease on life. As far as she knew, Fawkes had remained with him since that time, though the phoenix was free to leave at any time: no one had the power to keep a phoenix that did not want to be kept, not even Albus Dumbledore. But in the meantime, the two of them had formed a partnership of sorts. So

had Fawkes acted on his own, or had Dumbledore asked him to interfere?

Her head was starting to ache with all of the information she had just been told, but now that they were alone, Hermione knew there was one more question she had to ask. "Remus, why is Dumbledore acting like this?" she asked tiredly. "He hasn't talked to Harry at all this year as far as I know. He tried to use Occlumency on Ginny. Harry told me that he visited Gringotts, and Dumbledore had hidden a bunch of information from him. And he hasn't even made an attempt to advise Harry on what to do with the whole bond situation, which is partly what led to this." She gestured to Ginny and Harry.

"I wish I could tell you," Remus said quietly. There was so much sympathy in his warm amber eyes that Hermione swallowed hard. "Professor Dumbledore was a very strong, wise man when he was younger, but that much stress, combined with old age, is enough to make anyone choose the wrong path." He looked down at his hands and sighed. "It pains me to say it, but honestly, I can no longer believe that he has Harry's best interests at heart. He seems bent on winning the war no matter what the cost. Admirable until you realize that it could end up meaning that we lose Harry."

Hermione shivered and wrapped her arms loosely around her stomach. She would have liked nothing more at that moment than to lay her head on Remus's shoulder and cry until she fell asleep, but she stayed where she was sitting. "He was supposed to be the one person we could trust," she said dully.

"Come here, Hermione." A hand came around her elbow and urged her to stand. Hermione obediently rose and allowed Remus to lead her over to one of the beds. He helped her to sit down and then put something into her hands. She drank the potion and, seconds later, felt exhaustion sweeping over her in a blinding wave. Remus took the vial from her limp fingers and gently pushed her down so that her head was on the pillow. He remained standing beside her until she sank into a deep sleep.

NIR

Every muscle in her body ached unbearably. It felt like she - no, like they had been fighting for so long, but they were only losing ground. She'd known that he was there on the other side of the pearly white

river, fighting just as hard as she was, but there was no way to get to him. Every time she even thought about stopping the battle so that she could find some way to reach him, the shadows would threaten to converge on her, driving her back towards the river. Something in her rebelled at the thought of the river. However peaceful it might like, it was dangerous, and she knew that if she stepped inside, she would disappear forever. Better to stay where she was and battle the shadows no matter how exhausted it left her or how much she wanted to be by his side.

Then something changed. The misty, pearly river separating them changed, growing thinner and smaller. She could actually see him now, and she imagined that he could see her in return. They were close enough to reach out and touch if she had been willing to plunge a hand into the depths of the river. Once in a while, he would glance over at her, and she would see his emerald eyes flash with determination and heartbreak, because he felt the same way; they were trapped in an endless fight that they couldn't lose, but the outcome felt inevitable. His lips would part in a small smile - only for her, she knew - before he would turn back to face the shadow that was even larger than the one that she was facing. How he had been able to keep a shadow of that magnitude at bay, she had no idea. Her own strength was threatening to give way beneath the never-ending onslaught.

Another foot lost. She stumbled backwards and the edges of her hair caught in the gently flowing river. Panic laced through her and she staggered forward, nearly ending up in the shadow. Caught between a rock and a hard place, she wavered, her magic falling in useless tatters around her feet. Which fate would ultimately be worse? Would it be easier to end it all by giving herself over to the shadow that was threatening to engulf everything already? Or should she trust her life to the river and plunge herself into its depths? She felt frozen, like the shadows had seeped inside and turned her heart to ice, and she couldn't turn to face him no matter how much she wanted to see his face at that moment.

Suddenly, a soft, soothing sound echoed through the air. The song wove a spell around her, holding the shadows at bay and thawing the ice that had overwhelmed her heart. She closed her eyes and smiled, feeling like the sun - yes, she remembered the sun now - had come through. Behind her, his knees hit the ground as he, too, was affected by the sweet sounds. Unexpectedly, she felt like there

was hope - she could remember that, now, too - and she twisted, looking into his eyes. She knew him, though she couldn't recall his name.

"I love you," she realized, looking through the river at him.

He looked back and didn't speak, but it was all there in his eyes as he picked himself up off of the ground. The song grew brighter and stronger as they stepped forward as one, willingly throwing their bodies into the river. Whether through the current or the force of their own desires, she didn't know, but their bodies came together, and she clung to his shoulders as he wrapped his arms around her waist. Even though she'd spent hours (days? weeks?) being afraid of the pearly river, she was no longer frightened. It wrapped around them like a cocoon, shielding them from the subdued shadows. It sank into their skin, leaving them with a feeling like they had just drunk pure, untainted sunlight; it was a glorious warmth from within that couldn't be contained.

The world exploded and the shadows screamed in agony as they were destroyed. She wanted to scream, too, as they were both torn apart, but there was no chance. And by the time they were forged as one-in-two, she couldn't remember why she wanted to.

NIR

Ginny's eyes snapped open and she took in a quick, sharp breath that hurt. Her whole body stung with pain, like she'd been running for hours. No, not running - fighting. Vague memories of her time spent fighting against that shadow flitted through her mind at a pace too fast for her to understand. She tried to put a hand to her head, but something was holding it down. Feeling weak, she forced her eyes open and turned her head to see that familiar emerald green eyes were staring back at her. Harry managed a faint smile that was accompanied by a grimace, like it hurt him to smile just as much as it had hurt her.

"How are you feeling?" he asked tiredly.

"I've been better," Ginny replied, allowing her head to fall back down against the pillow. She probably should have been a little concerned about the fact that she was in bed with Harry Potter again, but she hurt too much for that. "What happened?"

"We were fighting..." His eyes fluttered shut for a moment. "I remember... that shadow. It felt like..."

"Voldemort," they said together. Ginny shivered as she recalled her first year and how it had felt when Tom Riddle cast the spell to drain her life force, like a cold, slimy darkness creeping up on her. It had been a struggle to keep her head above it, and that was exactly how the shadows had been in her dream, except that Harry had been there to fight with her. She tilted her head to look at him.

"I don't think we did the spell right," she said.

Harry didn't say anything. He was staring at her with wide eyes. "Say that again," he instructed quickly.

"Say what?" But even as she said it, Ginny understood what he'd been getting at. She'd been speaking... without moving her mouth. And then she realized that she hadn't been speaking at all, but that she'd been thinking and the words had been received by Harry anyway. Her eyes went wide with shock and she sat up. Pain shot through her instantly and she groaned, doubling over with a silent curse.

"Lay down," Harry commanded out loud, grabbing her shoulder and pulling her back down. "It hurts." The two of them shifted gingerly on the bed until they had found a comfortable enough position. Ginny was flat on her back and Harry was on his side, facing her. Almost automatically, their hands laced together as she tilted her head to look up into his green eyes.

"Can you hear this?" she thought.

Slowly, he nodded. "Yes, I can," he thought back, and it was the weirdest experience in the world to hear someone speaking, but not see their lips move.

"Harry, what happened to us?" she asked anxiously.

Harry shook his head and then grimaced at the resulting pain that shot through his head and down his neck. Ginny felt phantom pain sliding down her neck and shivered as he thought, "I don't know. I remember performing the spell and drinking the potion... and then

the next thing I knew, I was fighting that bloody shadow." He gingerly rubbed the back of his neck, and she felt her own pain ease at the steady motion, like he was rubbing her neck instead. "You were there, too, weren't you?"

"Yes." Dismissing her neck for the moment, she recalled her fear of the misty river and how convinced she had been that it would change everything if she dared get too close. Well, that had definitely been true. "Obviously something went wrong."

"Obviously," he answered, making a face. But he squeezed her hand gently to take the sting out of his comment and gave her a tentative smile. The moment was ruined when both of them looked up at the sound of footsteps outside the Hospital Wing door. By unspoken, mutual agreement, they closed their eyes and pretended like they were still sleeping as the door opened and the footsteps proceeded inside.

Someone sighed. "They moved position, but otherwise, it looks like there's no change."

"Remus!" she thought, startled, and felt a wave of shock that was most definitely not her own. Ginny clenched her hands into fists and fought back panic that she wasn't even sure belonged to her. Too much was happening at once.

"Nothing at all?" someone else asked, sounding disappointed. More footsteps approached their bed.

"I was sure that Fawkes would have an effect on them."

That was Professor Astrum. Something niggled at her mind, something important, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was. It was something about Astrum, though. "Come on, what is it?" she thought impatiently.

"What's what?" Harry thought back.

"Don't worry, alright? Harry and Ginny will both be fine. We'll bring Fawkes back in the morning and if that doesn't work, we'll try something else, Padfoot."

Harry went stiff.

Ginny's eyes flew open as a memory crashed over her. "That's what."

Please review!

Chp27